



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Where have all the Christians gone?

David Hines © 29 September 2019



I'm sorry to change my sermon topic at the last minute, but I just got a major shock last Tuesday to discover that the proportion of Christians in our country has crashed to 37%!! It was 48% at our last census, so that is a huge drop of 11 percentage points.

Many of my atheist friends are over the moon, but I think they've not read the figures right, because the proportion of atheists is only 0.15%, which also came as a shock to me.

I am shocked, because it shows I didn't really know my fellow-New Zealanders as well as I thought.

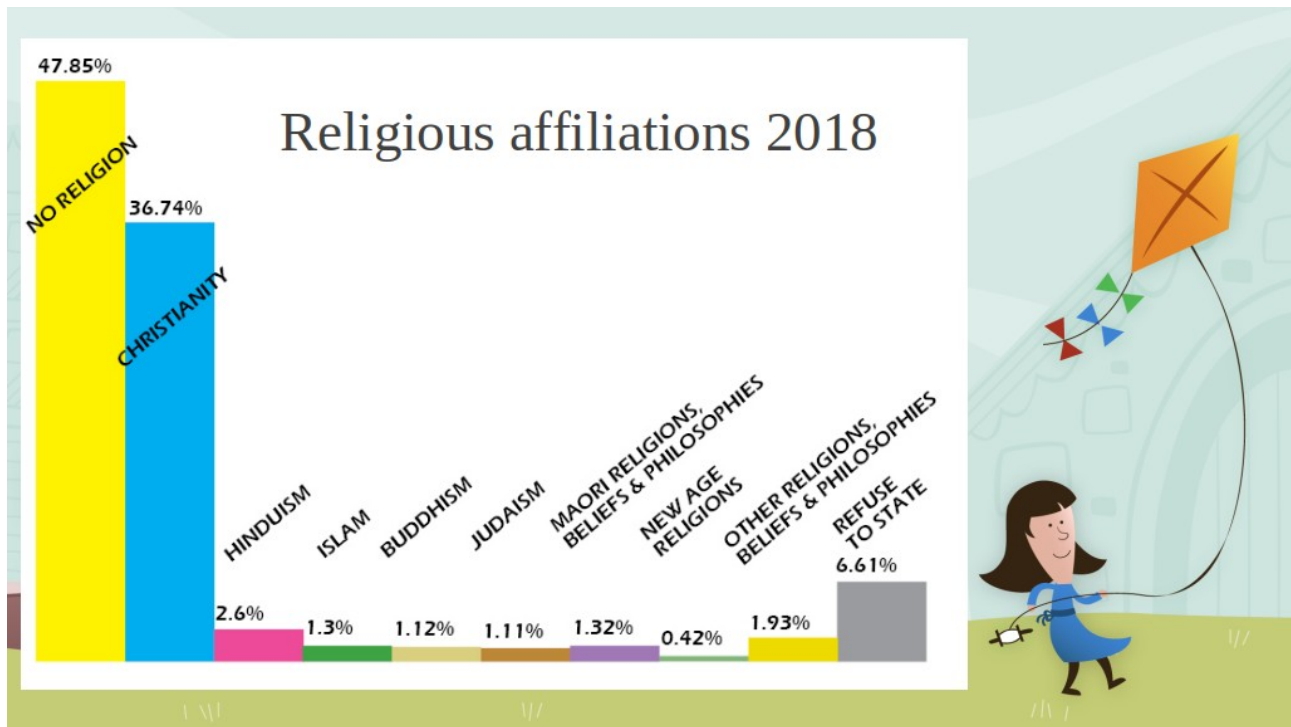
Most media have not even covered this, except TV One News.

I suspect the reason the media didn't comment was because they didn't get a press release from the Stats department, so they can't be blamed for not noticing.

The reason I noticed it was I was wanting to get these figures into our religion in schools court case, and our deadline for evidence is next Tuesday.

So I got a draft result from the Stats dept, but I had to work out the percentages and totals myself.

Hope I got it right!



Notice ESPECIALLY the two big columns on the left.

No religion is ahead of Christianity. I expected the no religion to go up a bit and the Christians down a bit.

I didn't expect this.

Maori religions:

Ratana have 43,821 people. They have not suddenly swung away from the Christian church; the Stats Department have just decided they are not a Christian church. So those 43,821 have not stopped going to church, they have just been reclassified. Same with Ringatu, Paimariri and other Maori beliefs.

In the same way, Unitarians, 354 of us, are classified as Christian, but probably we shouldn't be.

Other religions, beliefs and philosophies

They have grown 1.1 points, they now make 1.93%, or 91,000 of the population, so have those numbers increased hugely? Not at all, because nearly all of that increase came from the addition of 11 other groups who previously were not counted at all, or may have been counted as not answering the question.

They include:

Atheists 0.15 percent of the responses

Agnostics 0.14 of the responses.

But the biggest of the new members of this group are the Jedi, with .43%, or 20 thousand people. They are not new believers, but in previous censuses, the Census didn't take them seriously.

Should we take them seriously. Yes, for whatever reason. You cannot just dismiss 20,000 because you don't want to understand them.

I know personally some people in these groups... **Satanists**, for instance, and because they gave about \$4,000 to our religion in schools campaign; they were our third biggest giver. They are very real, and are very strong in their beliefs about a secular society. They are not new; they were just shut out previously, by the Stats Dept. Just because they have a weird title doesn't mean they don't count.

Another huge group are the **Sikhs**, who have 41,000 and are the fastest growing religions group... they should be counted as the sixth largest religion, not just in the "other religion" heap. I would expect Stats may move these up the list, when they print their interpretation, some months away.

No religion

I have left till last the no-religion group, who are now the biggest group. I didn't leave them on purpose, but I wanted to make it clear that they raise different issues.

Such as: they are not atheists, as some atheists would like to think.

They are not a religion, as some Christians say, who think that everybody must have a religion.

They have deliberately rejected those judgments and said, we are not in any of those categories.

They may not be anti-religion; they may just give religion a low priority.

And they are placed in a category of their own at the top of the list. And they make up 48 percent of the population.

WE know some of these people, from the Secular Education Network. I'd say from their replies that they don't want religious people to be in schools preaching to their children. But that does not mean they are hostile to religion. I suspect they range from neutral to bored. But you would be wrong to count them as atheists.

They are not a very articulate group. But SEN, and maybe other groups, give some of them a voice, issue by issue.

So the issue is: why do atheists want to count these people as on their side?

I know the answer from some atheists. They tell me they didn't tick the atheist box, because the thought that would look as though they were a religion. Several leading atheists and humanists did a strategic vote for no religion, but I think that was dishonest.

They object to being classified along with some religious groups at the bottom of the table, like Jedi. But the bottom group is not labelled other religions. It is labelled "other religions, beliefs and philosophies" I think it is appropriate to have that kind of box. A number of groups don't fit neatly into any religious, or anti-religious box. And I think atheism is one of them.

Some atheists when they see these results will ask that they should be categorised as part of the "no religion" box, believing that this is the main division between humans, those who believe in god and those who don't.

But in fact there are many groups which don't fall into either of those groups. I know of some: There are Christian atheists, including many of my friends; they want to be counted with their Churches, and many of their churches are happy with that. There are secular Jews ... their own label, who in the US have secular synagogues where nobody believes in God. They still are loyal Jews; they have not been thrown out. So it would be wrong to deny that Judaism is a religion because many of them don't believe in God. That is not their affiliation; their affiliation is to Judaism and they are not weird; they are just honest.

Ditto for Buddhists. According to one Buddhist friend, no Buddhists believe in God. Should they remove Buddhism from the list of religions? No, not until they want to be removed. It means that the term religion needs to be understood in terms of the real people who go to Buddhist temples.

Ditto for Hindus, who also include many people who don't believe in God.

So the practical conclusion I would draw ... is don't judge other religions by whether they fit your concept of religion. Let them set their own rules and loyalties, and adjust the categories, so they do reflect the real people who tick those boxes.

Another practical conclusion I make, is that atheists such as myself cannot put ourselves forward as the spokespeople for all the non-religious block of over two million people. They have rejected all those labels as applying to them. We may join them in some specific issues, but we are not their spokespeople.

One last group, the people who object to answering

That could mean they are secret Christians who don't want to be identified with any church.

They may be secret atheists who don't want to identify with other atheists.

But it is a legitimate position. And a significant one. Because their numbers have shown a huge rise...

They have jumped to 6.61 percent, from 4.4 percent. That is not a change in the boundary rules, because the same grouping existed in 2013; there are just several hundred thousand more of them. We don't know the reasons, but it sounds like they are a significant group. Just as 2 million people now want to be linked with no religion, there is another 200,000 who want to keep their views private. We should respect that. They could well be part of the same movement ... of people who don't want to be identified with any religion or any non-religion.

Ourselves

I make two personal comments as well. We are part of a tiny group, but we still carry some social clout. We make the country take note of our views at times, such as welcoming Indian students who were getting a hard time. And small groups such as our own, still count in our own civil rights.

Although the country has gone through a massive change: some things are the same, like respect for minorities, respect for different beliefs.

But we also need to be more aware of our neighbours' differences. The census has shown a light on our population, and come up with some surprises.

WE need to be more open to different shades of belief and disbelief.

We need to be able to form new allegiances, just as we do in politics all the time.

We need to be aware that our categories may be different from others. We may have partners, and we may have opponents that we didn't realise before.

Things have changed: we need to shift our perceptions.