

# FRAGMENTS OF FAITH

## *Religion in contemporary New Zealand*

PAUL MORRIS

### *The global context: The end of the Christian millennium?*

Changes in religion here both reflect and refract developments taking place around the world and it is often helpful to situate the local in the broader context.

Although it is estimated that a third of the planet's population are still Christian, that is somewhere around one and a half billion persons, this number has stabilised in the last two decades obscuring the fact that new converts are replacing dead Christians and those that merely fall away.

Most of the changes in the last decade have been in sub-Saharan Africa and in South America but in both these areas, movement is from one Christian church to another. In South and Central America it has been largely from a nominal, but still for me magical, Catholicism, to an active and magical for some, Pentecostal, or

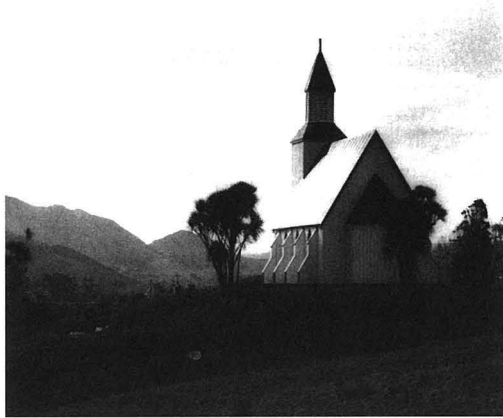
evangelical, North American type of Christianity. In Latin America the rhetoric and reality of religious change can be clearly seen. In Buenos Aires in 1995 I attended a number of

news'. Video screens are being set up in the Amazon jungle clearings and the Bible translated for the salvation of smaller and smaller language groups. All across the continent the

Assemblies of God and the independent Pentecostal churches are offering the Truth and healing the sick. In Chile I witnessed the miracles of faith – the lame are walking and the blind do see! – T-shirts are given out and cokes are freely distributed at the lively revivalist meetings. Our Lady of Guadeloupe, famed for granting a full womb to those desirous of sharing the divine mother's joy, is now surrounded mostly by the old Catholics desirous, I suspect, of other miracles. From Mexico to Argentina more than fifty million Roman Catholics

have embraced Protestantism in the last decade.

The Christian figures are also beginning to include many from the previously formally atheistic Soviet Union and its satellite states. China is



*Saint Gabriel's Church, Pawarenga – 'a place of pilgrimage and a quintessentially New Zealand monument to spirituality'.*

*From Michael King's God's Farthest Outpost.*

*Photo: Robin Morrison*

sessions of the World Baptist Alliance congress and saw the flags being placed on the world maps indicating where there were still people who had not, as yet but will have by the year 2000, heard the Christian 'good

still the largest prize and promise – I listened to an evangelical New Zealand preacher recently who has personally committed himself to the conversion of the Chinese pagans.

Christian Orthodoxy is having a new public life if not a revival.

Islam is growing fast in Africa with over thirty million new Muslims in the last two decades. There are also evidences of moves within Islam from more traditional and established forms to more active and committed types of faith. In our own cultural region we have this year seen the attempt to curb the intensification of Islam in the political sphere in Malaysia with the crackdown on the political opposition and its Islamic support. Likewise, in Indonesia, the president is keeping hard-line Muslim groups at bay. And, in Pakistan we have seen the extension of traditional Islamic legal structures and codes.

The Christian expansion is finally over and projections for the new century indicate a rapid increase in the numbers of Muslims through natural increase and conversion and exponential growth for Hindus and Buddhists. By the second decade of

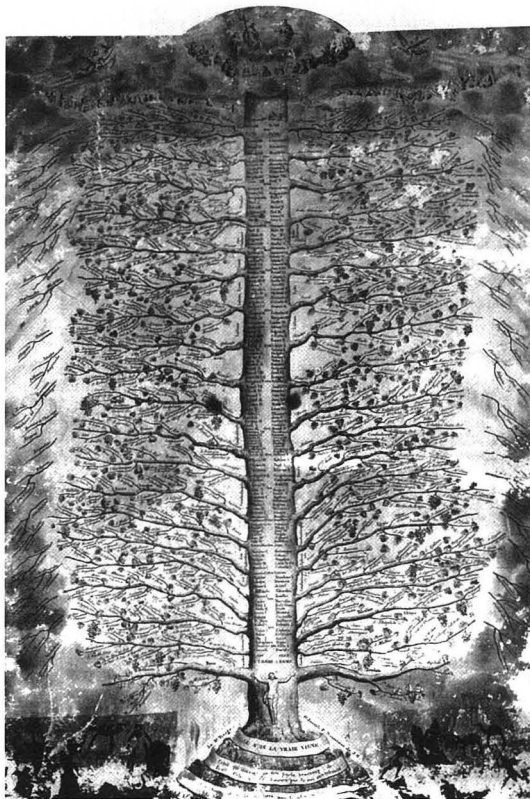
the 21st century Christianity will no longer be the largest faith. It is hard, in spite of the hype surrounding the beginning of Christianity's third

The churches are also changing their internal structure. For example, the Anglican church is no longer predominantly a white English

church with more communicants on a Sunday now in Kenya than in England! The synod of the Church of England last year evidenced the growing self-conscious power of the extremely conservative African and Asian bishops who managed after more than a decade and a half of liberality towards homosexual clergy to call for a return to sanctions. The Catholic Church also has found itself recently in a similar position with the reactionary voices coming from its Asian and African cardinals, bishops and archbishops. At the very time when Western cultural dominance appears at its most complete, the churches are being increasingly directed by non-Europeans with seemingly different values and agendas.

Within the Christian churches of the developed world a

clearly discernible shift is taking place. The Christians are dwindling away at an alarming rate and those who remain are getting older and



*'Bishop Pompallier's "Tree of the Church", with which his missionaries sought to explain to Māori the concept of Apostolic succession – the passing of authority from Christ through the Apostles, through the Popes, through bishops and down to contemporary Catholic clergy. The Protestant Churches were represented as branches which had withered and broken off the main trunk'. (King). Photo: Auckland Diocese*

millennium, to imagine a huge number of new converts to Christianity and the beginning of a new Christian era.

older. Church attendance figures and affiliations are declining in every western European country and even in the United States; the same is true, albeit differentially, in the erstwhile European colonies. In an earlier time, and perhaps once again, we might appropriately label this as Christians returning to paganism. The only exception to this near terminal decline of the churches is small pockets of evangelical and Pentecostal sub-culture lifestyle choices in the West and in the so-called less developed world.

To sum up this first point, institutional Christianity and Islam are growing where there is rapid social and cultural change and where people have an education that normally ends in the third or fourth form, and declining where people go on to tertiary education.

But the influence of Christianity is still massive and central to our thinking. The Clinton factor is indicative of the traditions of our morality which tend to be still Christian even as they are challenged. Poor Bill Clinton seems to have had more guilt than pleasure but the significant thing is that he has publicly repented! The debates in New Zealand over the code of moral and social responsibility and the whole new right debate globally is in large part a dispute about the true nature of Christian ethics.

The Christian West has, as Hegel's Fukuyama reported, been amazingly successful. We have inherited the world, the kingdom is to be found in our present modes of production, in all our forms of global market life. Protestantism has won, in a way we are all Protestant individu-

als now, shopping, saving for our promised futures and we can with some degree of legitimisation talk of Protestant Buddhism, or Islam, or even Hinduism. Ernst Gellner noted – with some surprise – just how little was required by way of modification for scripture-bound Islam to be quite compatible with global capitalism and he speculated that Islam might well turn out to be an 'improved form of Protestantism'. The Christian victory has not been in terms of the saving of souls but in terms of modes of production and consumption. Muslims may yet find themselves saved by shopping!

The secularisation of the West has been merely the loss of the influence of the institutional churches, the loss of the social form of Christianity. The differentiation of institutions has indeed reduced the churches to empty structures no longer engaged with health or education or even orientation for the soul, all these are done and done better by other institutions. The current fights in Christianity and Islam about, for example, evolution, are battles about the limits and extents of the powers of institutions. But the empty pew is not necessarily the evacuation or the end of the Christian world view or even of spirituality. Religion is alive and well, flourishing outside of the dying churches not as a new religion but as a plethora of spiritual and social forms, ranging from the eco-faith of some to the mysticism of the world-wide web for others.

### *New Zealand*

New Zealand without Christianity is unthinkable and anyway as yet unthought. Besides Christianity

what links Māori and Pakeha – citizenship, rugby, boating trophies? Christianity's greatest 19th-century successes were in the now almost entirely Christian Pacific. Our understanding of this, our religious history has not really begun yet. There have been a number of recent denominational histories that have served to add a richness and depth to the ways in which we comprehend the various forms of religion in New Zealand's short history. We are gaining insights into Māori Christianity, the public moral debates as New Zealand struggles to develop its own post-Christian codes, and into the religious lives of those that have played such a dominant role in the shaping of our sense of ourselves. We are less confident or proud about our blanket claims of our godlessness and increasingly aware that there is still work to do. Keith Sinclair, for example, asserts in the 1969 version of his history that 'simple materialism, health and possessions' have more significance to New Zealanders than salvation. By the 1980 version of the book this had been sensibly omitted. The same dangers persist. Belich does not focus on religion any more than Oliver did, and as we uncritically embrace a new series of revisionist agendas we need to attend to our religious past and its forms in our present and future. For example, there is a religious pattern not only to the ways in which the relationship with Māori developed on the part of different Christian churches but there is a religious pattern to the relationship between denomination and loyalty to the Crown. Likewise

there are religious dimensions to the rise of our political parties that continue to be of significance.

David Martin, the English doyen of the sociology of religion, told me that there was nothing unique about the development of religion/Christianity in New Zealand. But this is in fact only partially true.

Religious subcultures did develop here as elsewhere – Anglican, regional Catholicism and Southland Presbyterianism. In spite of these communities being shaped differentially by immigrant cultures, by the turn of the century a New Zealand culture started to take shape that came to dominate the religious subcultures long after their difference exists only at the rhetorical level. Catholics in New Zealand came to be much more like other Kiwis than Catholics anywhere else.

Here New Zealand is different compared to those two parallel colonial settler cultures, all too often mentioned unthinkingly in this three-fold company (even by people such as the Dutch sociologist Hans Mol). In Australia and Canada these minorities were larger in absolute numbers and in relation to Catholics a majority. Our Catholic minority status skews all our figures and has done since 1851. In Australia some 28%, and in Canada 50%-plus, are Catholics but in New Zealand the figure has been consistently between 13-16% for a century and a half.

There is also another current distinctive feature: compared to

Europe and the other post-colonial English-speaking world – the US, Australia and Canada – New Zealanders are second only to the Scandinavians in terms of their lack of religious identification and practice. And, just as a recent study shows that moving from a northern



*'Saint Mary's Church, Hokitika, built over 14 years, monumentalises the piety of the Catholic Irish of the West Coast in the late 19th and early 20th century. According to one art historian, such buildings represented "a huge expression of faith and affirmation of presence in the community"'. (King). Photo: Peter Quinn.*

to southern state in the US raises the migrants' level of religious identification and activities, so the opposite is true here, and migrants become less regular attendees. So we really are comparatively secular.

*What's going on? The 1996 census and the 1997 Church Life survey* First, the census. Since 1991 some 25,000 Catholics have disappeared to give 13%, or 473,082. The notable change for 1996 was that for the first time in 140 years the Catholics have moved into second place behind the Anglicans (17.46%) and the Presbyterians (12.67%). Before we celebrate

the end of Christendom we might consider that although the top four churches, the above three and the Methodists, have been subject to a truly dramatic fall in the last half decade – down from 56%, they still represent 47% of the population of our country. If we go just a bit

deeper into the Christian stakes it is clear that more than 60% of the nation still understands itself to be Christian.

There are other dramatic changes, the Anglican and Catholic churches are becoming more Māori and Polynesian and less English or Irish. The Christian sector has been added to as a result of the National government's immigration policy, most notably by Korean Presbyterians, and the more than 40 other Asian denominations that have established

congregations around the country. There is also a decline in Ratana and Ringatu numbers, in fact in almost every 19th- and early 20th-century movement, home-grown and imported, except Mormons who still show some growth by increased fertility rates as much as conversion. The only noticeable area of Christian growth is in the independent Pentecostal churches who display a 54% increase in numbers in the last five years. This is striking but needs to be interpreted in terms of starting from a very low base, and they still only number 30,000. This again appears to be different

from Canada and particularly Australia where Presbyterian charismatic churches have contained, as it were, this growth inside the mainstream churches and not outside. Locally there are hot spots on the Kapiti coast, on Auckland's North Shore and in South Auckland where a series of ethnic versions can be found – the Rock on SH1 at the bottom of the gorge, Elim churches in cities around the country.

Other notable changes can be found in the figures for ethnic religions. Buddhists have doubled in number, as nearly have Hindus. Buddhists include New Zealand-born and immigrants while the larger numbers of Sikhs and Hindus are mostly immigrants. Jewish numbers are up significantly, more than a third, since the 1950s with families from South Africa and the former Soviet Union. There are also a range of new classifications indicating increased religious differentiation, with New Agers, witches, Wicca, Satanists, and various other religious movements. There are also some strange ones even for someone in religious studies – I was convinced that the return of three children but no adults under 'Cardoism' was an error. Statistics NZ were no help. It transpires that Cardoism is a Vietnamese sect that seeks to synthesise Christianity and Buddhist beliefs and practises but only up to puberty! These new categories are very useful but make past comparisons difficult.

The single largest area of growth was in the category 'no religion'. This denial of any religious identity now accounts for nearly a quarter of the population up from just 5% fifteen years ago. In summary, larger numbers of non-religious, small areas of Christian growth, marked ethnic

same is true of some Anglican and Methodist congregations. Even some of the post-Christian communities, such as the Sea of Faith group, have similar age profiles. The churches all record high levels of commitment and this appears to increase with age. It is clear, however, that in the next decade or so there will be whole areas of the country without a significant Christian presence.

Professor Geering recently wrote that a new religion was in the making, the religion of Gaia, of the ecology of our planet. Do the figures support this? Yes, there is evidence that Satanists, Wiccans and Witches as well as those explicitly adhering to a nature religion do subscribe to a spirituality centred on the earth as living mother or force. But

while Geering sees this new religion as a replacement for a dying Christianity, these various forms are not easy to harmonise and it would appear that many new forms of religious belief and practice will develop. It seems less and less likely that we will all be followers of 'x' or adherents of 'y' again. Religious, and other diversity, appears to be increasing rather than the opposite.

### *New spiritualities*

The *Dominion*, in a recent article entitled, 'New Zealanders turning away from religion', reported the continuing general decline of religious activity in this country. Is religion dying in Godzone? Well, if not quite in a terminal condition,



*'Christchurch Catholics protest against a decision of Bishop Brian Ashby to sell the dioceses Maryknoll property, which was to be turned into a carpark'.  
(King) Photo: Robert Consedine.*

religious increases, and the main churches now clearly in terminal decline.

The Church Life survey is a snapshot of some 72,000 New Zealanders in 1200 churches around the country one Sunday in May. The picture here gives some further depth to the census story of decline. The age profile of church-going Christians in the country is notably higher than that of the population as a whole. Some 41% of those surveyed were over sixty. New Zealand's Christians are an ageing bunch on average and this is dramatically worsened when one takes out the Catholics and Pentecostals. There are Presbyterian communities where the average age is retirement age, and the

religion, as formal attendance or membership of religious institutions, is becoming increasingly located in a number of slowly withering sub-cultures, except for a few areas of growth amongst 'committed Christians' and the religious traditions of recent immigrant groups. And yet a walk around any of our cities and larger towns will take you past a growing number of specialist new shops selling books and magazines offering materials on meditation; counselling; a seemingly infinite variety of therapies; shamanism; natural diets; spiritual evolution; indigenous wisdom; the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and other Asian mystical traditions; guides to renewed human relationships; new science and metaphysics; spiritual self-help and healing; yoga; angels; re-birthing; reincarnation and other mystical and spiritual practices. Also in evidence are crystal shops and other purveyors of essences and potions.

Most of these specialist shops have notice-boards offering services ranging from massage, deep tissue, Reiki, Alexander technique, and other diverse forms of bodywork, aura readings, crystal healing, spiritual self-help workshops, guardian angel sessions, past-life regressions, holistic health programmes, and men's and women's spirituality groups. Magazines, such as *Rainbow*, *Network* and *Sedona* with large circulations in New Zealand terms, carry articles informing their readers of their evolutionary spiritual potential, and include pages of advertised services offering personal transformation on a one-on-one basis, by workshop attendance, or by buying something to listen to, or read.

This growing market has been recognised by our mainstream book shop chains who have reduced their sections on religion to a few Bibles and prayer books and a few volumes of post-Christian theology, and replaced them with much larger sections labelled new age, and/or spirituality. The reception of the Dalai Lama last year, who spoke to comparatively huge audiences around the country, suggests a burgeoning interest in spiritual matters. In addition, we read of major New Zealand companies including new age techniques as an integral part of their management training – one has even taught its managers to fire-walk, and it was standing room only at the latest Landmark weekend seminar, in spite of the fee of several hundred dollars. We watch television advertisements for tarot readings and a major denominational church in Wellington is holding regular Celtic services. Some of our friends and colleagues are learning about their past-lives, taking advice from ancient but still accessible channelled spirit guides, joining feminist spirituality groups, having acupuncture or aromatherapy, or have just finished reading the idiotic sequel to *The Celestine Prophecy*, a new-age book by Australian James Redfield.

Literally thousands of New Zealanders are involved with varying degrees of commitment. Are we witnessing a religious or spiritual revival? Will this be the first in the long religious history of the West that takes place beyond the influence of the churches and does not lead to new sectarian or denominational church groups? Without the research having been undertaken it is difficult

to give a definitive answer to this question. What is clear, however, is that the spiritual business in this country is worth millions of dollars a year and these developments falling under the rubric of new age/neo-paganism have parallels throughout the developed world.

There are a number of studies of new age movements and neo-paganism tracing their histories back to the last century, via the communes and counter-culture of the 1960s, to the plethora of marginal groups of the 1970s. In the late 1970s and 1980s the growth of the women's spirituality/goddess movement raised the profile of neo-paganism, and television specials such as Shirley Maclaine's 1987 *Out on a Limb*, watched by millions, launched new age beliefs and practices into the cultural mainstream.

New age and neo-pagan practices claim to offer spirituality without a central church or organisation, without doctrines and creeds, a spirituality compatible with the radicalisation of individualism where the self is the ultimate locus for determining what is true. In spite of the diversity of new age and neo-pagan movements there are a number of common threads. There is much use of the language of convergence, holism and harmony. Life is viewed as learning and development and direct spiritual experience is at the heart of one's life project, a sort of guided, do-it-yourself spirituality. It is claimed that non-rational as well as rational sources of knowledge are equally if not more significant. We must learn to change ourselves by fostering our own inward transformation. Such movements tend to be

immanentist, that is there is little place for transcendental deities or salvation, the question is rather what must I do to heal myself and the planet, and how can I reconnect myself to the source, be it land, planet, past selves, inner self, or the god(dess) within.

The new age, and some object to this designation as connoting selfishness and/or commercialisation, focuses less on ritual and many consider that we are on the brink of a spiritual breakthrough, a transformation that will take place under the weight of a critical mass of individuals who have increased their spiritual awareness. This view was promoted by the yogic flyers and mediators of the Natural Law Party in our recent general elections. It is claimed that the dualism of the Piscean age is over, with opposites converging in the current Aquarian age. There is widespread belief in reincarnation (the 1993 Gallup poll recorded that 26% of Americans hold such a belief), past-lives, and the emergence of a planetary culture based on human spiritual transformation. The week before last we had a Peruvian shaman

visit the department who talked about his ancestral Inca traditions – past lives, re-incarnation, planetary visits, the need to redress the balance between our material and spiritual lives – he could have been summarising Shirley Maclaine!

Neo-paganism is usually defined as the revival and /or invention of the 'ancient' reverence of the goddess – the recovery of the pre-Christian, pre-patriarchal traditions of goddess nature religion – and takes a number of distinct forms. Here the stress is more on community and myths, ceremonies and rituals (dance and trance, individual and group) celebrating the seasons of nature's year with a powerful and central 'green' component and a more balanced view of the relationships between material and spiritual. In one of its prominent forms, Wicca (Witchcraft), many women are reported as have been led to a 'coming out of the broom closet'.

In conclusion, religion is still very much with us whether in the form of a national debate of sorts over the 'virgin and the condom' or of issues of the spiritual content of state school education. What we are left with are

fragments, fragments of faith, in some ways more powerful as fragments than as polished, orchestrated wholes. Fragments that continue to shape our lives, individually and collectively, but fragments that happily exist outside of the institutions that created, protected and propagated them. The churches will never recover here nor elsewhere in the Western world and it is only a matter of accelerated time before the less developed world comes to recognise that the links between Protestantism and new modes of production and consumption are not essential and that secularists may not only shop more but can shop for the best form of salvation too! ✨

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