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LEARNING FROM A MORE SECULAR FUTURE:  
INSIGHTS FROM AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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*Writing from the Future*

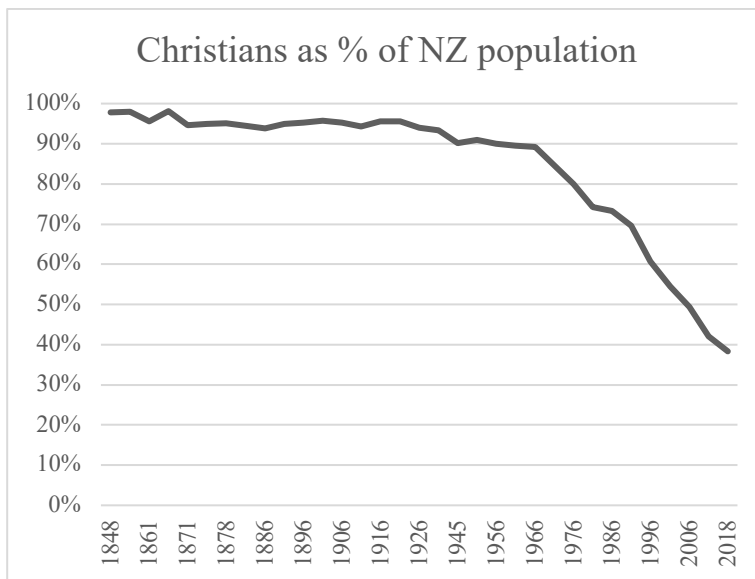
I am writing to you from the future—literally. Whatever time it is in Canada, you can be sure that we are at least 18 hours ahead of you: Aotearoa New Zealand’s East Cape is the first place to welcome each day and each new year.

I am also writing from a different kind of future. According to the latest Census data, over half of Canadians are still affiliated with Christianity. Down here, that seems like a lot. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we dipped below 50 percent Christian in 2006, and by 2018, the number of people of no religion was higher than the number of Christians. (We are still waiting on the 2023 data to be released.)

In this brief essay, I begin by discussing some characteristics of religion, church attendance, spirituality, and secularization in Aotearoa New Zealand, before offering two contrasting ways that we could consider the situation we now find ourselves in. I then turn to the Canadian context, noting points of similarity and difference. I conclude by offering hopeful signs from research that demonstrates a continued (perhaps increasing) interest in spirituality and that people do still embrace the Christian faith. This research from a more “secularized” context can provide insights for Canadian churches and Christians as they navigate changed and changing times.

*The New Zealand Context**Declining Religious Affiliation*

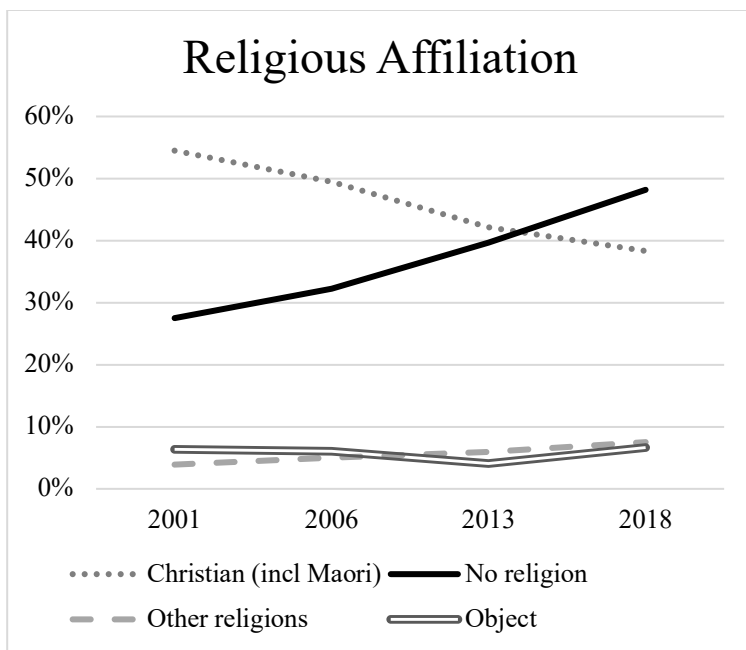
In New Zealand, affiliation with Christianity was fairly stable from the earliest census in 1848 (when the total population was less than 100,000) until the late 1960s. A steady decline followed: from 89 percent Christian in 1966 to 38 percent Christian in 2018 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Christian religious affiliation in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>**

The decline in Christianity was very partially offset by an increase in proportions of people of other faiths (rising to 7.5 percent in 2018). But it was the proportion of people of “no religion” that was growing markedly. In fact, between 2013 and 2018, the number of religiously unaffiliated people overtook the number of Christians, reaching 48 percent to Christianity’s 38 percent in 2018. (See Figure 2.)

1. Data from New Zealand Census. Spreadsheet maintained by author.



*Figure 2: Religious affiliation, New Zealand 2001–2018<sup>2</sup>*

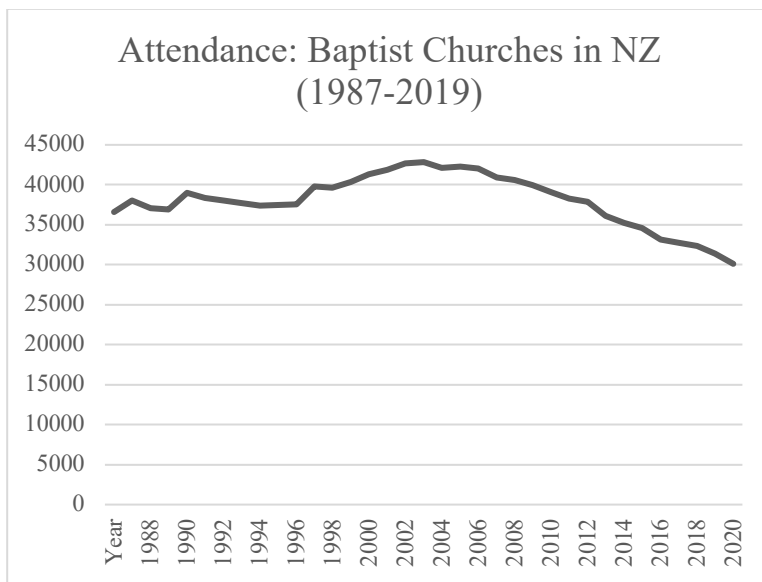
### *Declining Church Attendance*

Of course, religious affiliation is just one measure of secularization. Another relatively easy measure is church attendance. This, too, is declining in most denominational contexts in New Zealand. I am most familiar with the Baptist data, where the denomination (mostly) grew until the early 2000s. However, much of this growth was as a direct result of former attenders of mainline churches transferring to Baptist churches. Further, that growth was increasingly unable to keep pace with population increase. Later, much of the growth came in ethnic churches (and then in multicultural churches) where immigrants, particularly from the

2. Data from New Zealand Census. Spreadsheet maintained by author.

less secularized Pacific, masked what would otherwise have been a decline in attendance in both percentage and real terms.

From 2003, the picture has been one of general decline. Even excluding the COVID-19 period, there was a nearly 25 percent drop in attendance of Baptist churches between the peak in 2004 and 2019. (See Figure 3.)



**Figure 3: Baptist church attendance 1987–2019<sup>3</sup>**

*Post-COVID Decline*

In the post-COVID period, declines in church attendance have been dramatic. Anecdotally, I frequently hear the figure of a one-quarter drop in church attendance from pre-COVID to today. The 2022 Baptist statistics certainly showed such a decline, although there seems to have been some recovery in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

3. Data from Baptist churches annual statistical returns. Spreadsheet maintained by author.

4. The 2023 data is yet to be fully captured and reported.

Across many areas of life, COVID-19 acted as an accelerant: acting for good and for ill; sparking the best and the worst of actions and attitudes, and everything in between. The pandemic also sped up processes that were already inevitable. This happened in relation to church attendance in New Zealand, where even following the easing and removal of gathering restrictions, many found that their priorities had changed along with their habits. Fewer people attend church, and those who do attend are likely to do so less frequently.

#### *Declining Influence of Christianity on Society*

Unsurprisingly, Christianity does not hold an overt place of influence in Aotearoa New Zealand. While, in many ways, influence is deeply embedded in society and laws, there are no opportunities or expectations that a “Christian perspective” will be sought or valued in the marketplace. Churches and Christians experience this in different ways, as mainline churches lament a loss of influence or invitation to speak into public discourse, and more evangelical churches struggle with social values that seem at odds with the moral stances that they hold to.

#### *Problem or Condition?*

This new reality can be viewed in at least two ways. Christianity’s minority status and declining influence can be seen either as a problem or as a condition.<sup>5</sup>

Viewing it as a problem implies that it is something that needs to be solved, something that can be solved. The church in New Zealand has been seeing declining religious affiliation and declining church attendance as a problem for several decades—a problem that they have been unsuccessful in “solving” despite rigorous and sustained efforts. The same is true of declining social and political influence; this can also be seen as a problem that needs to be solved, perhaps by seeking to “take control of the levers of government.”<sup>6</sup>

5. Here I am drawing on Brian Harris’ helpful distinction between “problems” and “conditions.” See Harris, “Towards a 21st Century Church,” n.p.

6. Fitch, “Why Christian Nationalism is Anathema,” n.p.

A more helpful way of viewing this new reality is not as a problem but as a condition: a changed circumstance that is a new reality. It is important to note that in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is more to this condition as well: a deep appreciation of what indigenous Māori call *wairuatanga* (spirituality).

*Spirituality is Valued*

In 1840, a treaty was signed in New Zealand between the indigenous Māori and newly arrived European settlers. While Māori have certainly suffered the ill effects of colonization, among the impacts of the Treaty/Te Tiriti, particularly recently, has been a burgeoning valuing of spirituality, recognized as foundational to our nation. This has resulted in both an increased general attention to spirituality, as well as legislated and cultural appreciation of *te ao Māori* (the Māori world) and *wairuatanga*.

As Troughton and Fountain note, “an indigenous Māori cultural renaissance and state attempts to recognise the moral imperative of decolonisation . . . have resulted in new languages of spirituality shaping both law and politics.”<sup>7</sup> To illustrate, recent government legislation has acknowledged the spiritual connection that Māori have with the land. Spirituality is widely viewed as a crucial dimension of health and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> *Karakia* (ritual prayer) is frequently included in state occasions, schools, and business and community meetings.<sup>9</sup>

While certainly not embraced by all, such attention to *wairuatanga* has permeated society and contributed to a greater appreciation of spirituality. This is part of what Charles Taylor would call the “changed conditions of belief” in New Zealand.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, migration has brought with it people of faith. As Filipino Catholics and Middle Eastern Muslims immigrate,

7. Troughton and Fountain, “An Insecure Secularity?” 529. In late 2023, a new coalition government was elected that seems intent upon rolling back many recent attempts at honoring the Treaty. See, for instance, Duff, “A Massive Unravelling,” n.p.

8. Durie, “A Maori Perspective on Health,” 6.

9. Troughton and Fountain provide a concise description of how these are outworked. Troughton and Fountain, “An Insecure Secularity?” 532–34.

10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

Aotearoa's landscape changes. For instance, in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, 74 percent of Roman Catholics were born overseas.<sup>11</sup> Migrants are also younger and welcoming new generations of children. This further complexifies the landscape as some Christian denominations and other religions grow while most denominations decline.

#### *A Secular Context*

All this points to New Zealand as being deeply secularized. Drawing on Charles Taylor's framing, we are experiencing declining religious affiliation and attendance; declining influence of Christianity in the public square; and changed conditions of belief.<sup>12</sup> The latter includes a deeper appreciation of spirituality. But that is New Zealand. How about Canada?

#### *On Canada*

Canada is clearly experiencing a decline in religious affiliation, although it still remains considerably more religiously affiliated than New Zealand. As Stuart Macdonald and Brian Clarke noted in 2017, "decline in Christian affiliation, membership, and participation started [in Canada] in the 1960s and has picked up pace rapidly since then."<sup>13</sup> Canada's current rate of decline continues to be high; in fact it is increasing.<sup>14</sup>

In Canada, rates of affiliation are also unevenly distributed across the country, with "Canadian nones . . . more likely to reside

11. McDonald et al., *Insights from the 2023 Church Life Survey New Zealand*, 8.

12. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

13. Macdonald and Clarke, *Leaving Christianity*, 11.

14. At -2.31 percent, the relative percentage change per year is comparable with the decline experienced in New Zealand between 2006 and 2013 (-2.26 percent pa). In Canada, this is up from -1.35 percent pa between 2001 and 2011. By contrast, between 2013 and 2018, NZ's rate of decline had decreased to -1.87 percent pa. Unlike NZ, therefore, Canada's rate of decline is still increasing. (Here, I am using the calculation employed by Andrew Reyngoud, "An analysis of the variations and future implication," 58. This takes into account the two-year delay in New Zealand's 2013 Census, a result of the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake.)

in . . . British Columbia” than elsewhere in Canada.<sup>15</sup> While New Zealand shows marked denominational variation across different regions, based largely on historical migration/settlement patterns, there is not such a regional variation in overall affiliation. In Canada, this difference means that insights drawn from one region may not translate directly to another; but like NZ, BC may also act as a sort of “future” for the rest of Canada.<sup>16</sup>

### *How to Respond?*

Declining Christian religious affiliation, church attendance, and influence can all contribute to a lack of confidence among churches and Christians. Analyzing longitudinal research on churches in Australia, Ruth Powell notes that what she calls “collective confidence creates a positive spiral,” contributing to an environment that welcomes newcomers.<sup>17</sup> The inverse is also true. This final section outlines some lessons from a “future” that, while highly secularized, can nonetheless be a site of spiritual vitality. The essay then concludes with suggestions for how one might live in these changed and changing times. I hope that these insights about a future where people remain open to exploring Christian faith can work to build a collective confidence in Canadian churches, towards a hopeful future, albeit one that is necessarily different than the present and the past.

A recent study of “Faith and Belief” among a representative sample of people in Aotearoa New Zealand showed that most people can imagine themselves further investigating faith and/or spirituality. Specifically, 75 percent of respondents pointed to “experiencing a personal trauma or significant life change”; 68 percent to “exploring different spiritual practices”; and 66 percent to “seeing first hand people who live out a genuine faith or spirituality” as

15. Dilmaghani, “Canadian Religious Trends,” 626.

16. However, historian Lynne Marks asserts that BC was never actually particularly religious, as white settlers “found a unique freedom to be actively irreligious.” Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*, 4. Also, see Byassee and Lockhart, *Better Than Brunch*, 2–3.

17. Powell, *What Makes a Healthy Church?* See also Powell et al., *Models of Church Vitality*.



things that might attract them to explore faith or spirituality for themselves.<sup>18</sup> My own PhD research on why previously unchurched Australians become Christians today confirms that exploring different spiritual practices and seeing people live out authentic faith are significant among the things that attract people to Christianity. Engaging in spiritual practices works to form faith.<sup>19</sup> A desire for what I call relational authenticity, and a witnessing of it in the lives of Christian friends acts as both a key motivation for and an enhancer of faith exploration.<sup>20</sup>

The Faith and Belief study also tells us that it is really only 18 percent of the population who are cold towards Christianity, either having “strong reservations about Christianity and . . . no interest in it” (12 percent) or being “passionately opposed” to it (6 percent).<sup>21</sup> Worth noting here are the generational differences: it is the younger generations who are “slightly more likely than their older counterparts to be warm towards Christianity (30% Gen Z, 28% Gen Y cf. 24% Gen X, 25% Baby Boomers).”<sup>22</sup> Growing up in more secular times does not result in a lack of openness to, or negative perceptions of, Christianity. It seems more a case of indifference than antagonism. While this is heartening, we should also recognize that there may well be painful stories behind the greater resistance in older generations. Also noteworthy is that intolerance, judgementalism, behavior and morals, hypocrisy and unwelcome evangelism were all named as “aspects of Christianity and/or Christians that [at least 5 percent of all] respondents find problematic or challenging.”<sup>23</sup> How Christians act and respond and what they say are important.

18. McCrindle, *Faith and Belief Te Patapātai Whakapono*, 19.

19. Taylor, “Our Doing Becomes Us,” 332–41.

20. Taylor, “A Multidimensional Approach,” 33–51.

21. McCrindle, *Faith and belief Te Patapātai Whakapono (Short Report)*, 31.

22. McCrindle, *Faith and belief Te Patapātai Whakapono (Long Report)*, 41.

23. McCrindle, *Faith and belief Te Patapātai Whakapono (Long Report)*, 45. These responses were coded from qualitative data. Further analysis would be worthwhile.

The study also points to yearnings and needs that churches are (or at least should be) well-placed to meet.<sup>24</sup> A desire for a deeper sense of community and belonging, a longing to feel hopeful about the future, and a sense of hopelessness about the state of the planet. These are all things that churches ought to be able to resource and strengthen. Doing so requires a church that is not pre-occupied with its own structures and members but is actively listening to those beyond their walls, seeking to understand the yearnings and to resource the spirituality and well-being of those around them.

As always the church is invited to act with faithfulness, humility, faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. Our secularized context is not a problem that can be solved. Rather, it is a condition that we now live in.

As a result of this new reality, there are several questions that churches and Christians can be asking. The question is not “how do we solve this problem?” “But how do we live now?” “How might we be the church today?” “How do we faithfully witness to God’s goodness and grace?” “How do we sustain the spirituality, and faith development of people in our churches?” And “How might we resource those beyond our churches who want to embrace or resource their spirituality? Of those who want to live flourishing lives?”

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24. See McCann and Bechsgaard, *The Sacred in Exile*.

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