

# THE TERMINAL DECLINE OF CHRISTIANITY IN NEW ZEALAND

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## ABSTRACT

The 2013 New Zealand Census records indicate the reduction of Christianity to 47 percent. Retired scientist, Ken Perrott, charts Christianity's decline in every recent census and projects its decline to just above 20 percent by 2030 and further, beyond that date. It is, of course, very unlikely to disappear altogether, but, equally, the chances of a major Christian revival in New Zealand are very remote.

This paper probes the process and reason of decline of Christianity both as an institutional mechanism as well as a doctrine. Christian critics confuse secularisation with secularism when they claim that secularism is government characterised by 'the lack of any apparent, overt, visible interest in God, the Bible, religion or spiritual values'. The notion that government should attempt balanced compromises between all worldviews, that is political secularism, is not on their radar. They do not seem to take the point that their rigid views do not sit well with democracy and are inherently totalitarian in nature.

Ritualistically there are alternatives to religions. Over decades they have been conducting naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals as alternatives to church services. The majority of these ceremonies are now civil. The families experiencing a civil ceremony for the first time have found that a meaningful ceremony is possible without religion. On every possible occasion they have chosen that option. Churches have been undermined at an important point of interface between themselves and the public.

Today, in the high-intensity, market-setting, capitalist economy, it is a near impossible question, a source of confusion, as only extreme ascetics deny all forms of materialism. The major question probed in the paper is this unscientific doctrine of Christianity at its very base. What is the need of sustaining such unscientific mechanism?

Keywords: ***Secularism, Secularisation, Decline, Christianity, Religion, Rational, New Zealand***

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## Introduction

The 2013 New Zealand Census records indicate the reduction of Christianity to 47 percent. Retired scientist, Ken Perrott, charts Christianity's decline in every recent census and projects its decline to just above 20 percent by 2030 and further, beyond that date (Open Parachute 2013). It is, of course, very unlikely to disappear altogether, but, equally, the chances of a major Christian revival in New Zealand are very remote.

Perrott argues that citizens can 'double dip' in the census by being a member of more than one group. He argues there are more responses to the religion question than that of citizenry. Given the majority of census religion question options are Christian, those ticking more than one Christian denomination could be, mathematically, in excess of 100000. If that is so, Christianity in New Zealand could now be as low as 41.9 percent (Open Parachute 2013).

There was a stunning rise in the number of people declaring 'no religion', a total of 1.635 million citizens out of a total population of 4.24 million. They remarked the number of census respondents who identified as 'no religion' or who did not answer the religious affiliation question. This was more than the total number who identified as Christian. This is believed to be the first time this has happened in New Zealand census history.

In a major address entitled 'The Gospel in the Decade Ahead' published on the website of the New Zealand Christian Network (NZCN) in 2011, which was later removed, the national director, Glyn Carpenter, said that the NZCN's agenda was partly to 'turn the tide of secularism' and 'rebuild a marriage culture'. Three years later their agenda is in tatters with the government legislating for gay marriage on 19 August 2013 and the census result showing Christianity in a state of steep decline. It goes to the credibility of the NZCN that its website makes no mention of the Census result.

## Secularism and Secularisation

Like many hardliners, evangelist Glyn Carpenter confuses 'secularisation' with 'secularism.' Secularisation refers to the on-going, centuries-old, societal process of the fading away of religion as a part of everyday life. Many Christian writers agree with Max Weber's location of the origins of secularisation in the sixteenth century reformation, the Protestant-Catholic split which 'allowed the freedom of the believer to think for himself' (Paulien 1987: 27). Briefly, it is characterised by the decline of religion as a factor shaping human life; replacement of community by a society-wide, pluralistic, materialistic, rational culture; a reliance on scientific modes of thinking and planning; the gradual diminution of the supernatural as a credible idea.

A Seventh-Day Adventist author wrote in 1987, well before Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett came to prominence, that ‘the threat to religion in [the] modern techno polis does not come in the first place from aggressive atheism or the state or secularism, but from the urban-societal system itself with its underlying principles and attitudes and assumptions’ (Oosterwal 1987: 56).

Christian critics confuse secularisation with secularism when they claim that secularism is government characterised by ‘the lack of any apparent, overt, visible interest in God, the Bible, religion or spiritual values’ (Finley 1987: 99). This misses the key point, recognised by many other Christians, that secular government is characterised rather by separation of church and state, as inferred, they argue, in Jesus’ famous response to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.

Locating separation of church and state in these words is contestable. Nevertheless, there is the key recognition here that government and religion are better separated. If they are not separated it follows that government is theocratic to a degree. I have argued this is the case in Australia and New Zealand, as many symbolic and financial aspects of government preference religion very advantageously, despite its decline (Wallace 2013). Evangelical Christians, like many Muslims and other hardline religious, just do not understand, or refuse to understand, or reject the principle of political secularism. They are wedded to a worldview that simply cannot countenance any alternative to their own.

In such a context a working definition of the term ‘ideology’ could be the inability, or total reluctance, to consider that other worldviews as credible alternatives to one’s own. The notion that government should attempt balanced compromises between all worldviews, that is political secularism, is not on their radar. They do not seem to take the point that their rigid views do not sit well with democracy and are inherently totalitarian in nature.

## **Aspects of Christian Decline**

Sociologically, it seems the party is over for Christianity in New Zealand. While the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists’ radio campaign to encouraged citizens to tick ‘no religion’ in the 2013 census may have been successful, it is more likely that long term trends of secularisation and various sexual abuse and financial scandals associated with churches have put them beyond the point of no return; future declines in adherents seems certain well into the future.

The impact of civil celebrants, I believe, has also been very important. Over decades they have been conducting naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals as alternatives to church services. The majority of these ceremonies are now civil. I assume families experiencing a civil ceremony for the first time have found that a meaningful ceremony is possible without religion. On every possible occasion they have chosen that option. Churches have been undermined at an important point of interface between themselves and the public.

This decline of religiosity is also global in most western nations. Even in the most religious, the United States, a British Christian theorist was advising his colleagues around 1987 that ‘one of the best means of witnessing to those who do not currently have spiritual interests is at points of personal crisis: divorce, the death of a spouse, the loss of a job, or a serious accident or illness’ (Finley 1987: 104).

In other words, the mainstream message of Christianity even by then had little impact and the best way to convert citizens was, like compensation lawyers, to chase ambulances. Glyn Carpenter himself has conceded in the speech cited above that ‘that is how he found God.’ Despite their vast wealth, in the billions, forever accumulating thanks to their tax-exempt status; despite all the funding they have received for their religious schools; despite their wealthy, independent tax-exempt colleges; despite their schools of theology in universities; despite all the media time through various radio and television programmes, either through purchased time or their own media; despite their various campaigns, their bookshops, their churches, their profile in the symbolic activities of government, the Anglican Queen’s tours – despite all this – Christianity in New Zealand is falling as a whole.

By focusing too much on (a) the accumulation of wealth, (b) attempts to influence government, (c) the pursuit of status and prestige and (d) risible attempts to rationalise all that, Christians have lost the plot. They are supposed to be about spiritual wealth and salvation, that is their *raison d’être*, but it is one gig they do not want to personalise. They dish it out, but few practice it. They do not sell off their assets to alleviate poverty in pursuit of the Christian ideal of giving in a truly serious way, preferring to boast, in a self-aggrandising way, about how the sky would fall in if it was not for their charities. This is only partly true, and many of them live quite well, thank you, in comfortable positions running those charities.

It is this double standard that is augmenting their decline, as the average citizen cannot see any difference between themselves and how self-confessed Christians live. To be sure, they are caught between a rock and a hard place: ‘How are we Christians going to live in a money-loving world and yet not be of

this world?’ (King 2004: 155). That is a question that perhaps understandably could not be properly framed two thousand years ago when Christianity commenced. On the one hand they were told it was easier for a camel to pass through an eye of a needle than for a rich person to get to heaven. On the other they were told their God provided the abundance of the world for them to enjoy. Maybe two thousand years ago in a tiny, simple, illiterate, peasant economy that subtle but all-important contradiction could go unnoticed.

Today, in the high-intensity, market-setting, capitalist economy, it is a near impossible question, a source of confusion, as only extreme ascetics deny all forms of materialism. Because it is a project that will not be realised, as there will never be enough Christian will to do so, Christianity will continue its downward slide (Frame 2009; Akehurst 2013; Mickelborough 2013). The new Pope, naming himself after the eccentric ascetic, St Francis, is trying to square this circle symbolically by cutting down on his Vatican luxuries: a futile gesture from the man who is the sole owner of the never-publicly-audited Vatican Bank.

## Conclusion

Just why all taxpayers should continue to subsidise Christianity’s failing mission in New Zealand (and by extension, elsewhere) through tax exemptions, grants, exemptions from legislation, is a question that is now thrown into relief.<sup>6</sup> There are many secular demands on the budget, alternative ways to allocate taxpayers’ revenue that would help grow the economy. It is not in the public interest for New Zealand to subsidise Christianity’s (and other religions’) failing private projects. It is time for government to move with the soon-to-be majority of the public, and blow the whistle on this game.

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<sup>6</sup> A basic discussion of this issue can be found at ‘Flush kiwi charities failing to pay out’, [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz), 18 May, 2013.

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