



RETHINKING THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LIFE

Whether we like it or not, religious belief is of major importance to vast numbers of humankind.

Last year's census revealed a growing number of New Zealanders who state they have no religion - now over one third of the population. This growing trend flies in the face of the experience of the vast majority of populations outside of Western Europe and Australia. The United States of America is the stand out Western country, bucking the anti-religion trend big time, with a very large percentage stating their religious affiliation.

While it may seem fashionable to dismiss religion in one's life, political leaders and diplomats both in New Zealand and internationally, are nevertheless coming to the conclusion that religious belief, whatever they think of it personally, must be taken into greater account when ensuring national and international well-being.

Many of the world's most intractable disputes have religious belief inextricably woven into them. It is easy to blame religion for wars and other conflicts, the reality however is that the resolution of these issues has to take into account their religious dimensions, as world leaders and diplomats are fast recognising.

In New Zealand's secular landscape we run the risk of believing that the non-religious stance of a section of the pakeha population is the way the world is. In fact, with 1.2 billion Muslims, 1.9 billion Christians, hundreds of millions of Hindus, Shintoists, Buddhists, and countless adherents of other religions, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of the world's 6.5 billion people are believers, for whom religion does play a significant role in their lives.

A major issue that the world community faces is to accept that no group, religious or otherwise, has a monopoly on enlightenment or truth - we surely all have to be seekers after truth. Respecting the mosaic of beliefs people hold is fundamental to enjoying liberty and freedom. The world community, and any national society, is the richer for religious diversity and human philosophies. Strength comes from mixing up the gene pool.

Uncompromising, loudly proclaimed religious assertions imposed coercively on others are never acceptable. Religious belief and spiritual understandings are only authentic when they deliver behaviours that respect the sacredness of others and their particular human rights.

Religion is a large part of what motivates many people and shapes their views of justice and right behaviour. One of the major platforms any leader has to take into account in seeking solutions to conflicts is to build on the core dimensions of

the world's great religions which urge compassion and respect for others, and an attitude of humility in the search for truth.

On the other hand, religious belief and practice can sometimes get in the way of resolving intractable conflicts. In seeking to persuade antagonists to resolve issues the first step is to acknowledge the role religion plays in such conflicts.

After all human beings want to be treated well by others – if we can build trust and understanding we will find that conflicts are ultimately amenable to a reasonable approach.

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