

## **How does Spirituality fit in New Zealand's so-called "Secular Society"?**

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It is well known that New Zealand does not rank high amongst western countries in terms of attendance at religious services of worship, although the last census showed that 65% of us still regard ourselves as being connected with one religion or another. But Jesus once said "you shall know people by the fruits they bear", suggesting that it is not in terms of religious observance that one's faith is measured, but rather in terms of the fruits of that faith, eg compassion, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation or peace.

Using that criterion, New Zealand probably does rather well. Over the last 30 years, this nation has displayed leadership that has reflected a high standard of ethical policy-making. With influence disproportionate to our size we have been to the fore in key areas such as:

- developing a growing sense of partnership between indigenous and settler peoples under the Treaty of Waitangi
- standing back from the nuclear arms race at a time when it was not popular to do so
- more recently standing back from conflicts which lack ethical base or international endorsement
- yet not being isolationist, but committed to peace-making globally
- responding generously to human need at home and abroad
- being clear in our opposition to apartheid and any form of discrimination, and working to build an inclusive multi-faith and multi-cultural society
- placing a high value on the leadership of women.

Other nations might have a higher degree of religious observance, yet would fall far short of New Zealand in terms of bearing the kind of policy settings one would expect faith to lead to.

I believe that ethically-based policy arises out of a healthy spirituality, both individual and national. For me one of the key spiritual sources in this regard is to be found in the Creation stories in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis in the Hebrew scriptures. It is sad to see fundamentalists locked in combat with scientists attempting to prove that the biblical stories of Creation are scientifically based. They make a fundamental category mistake, and miss the far greater significance of those stories in terms of theology.

The Creation offer a vision of life which is in essence relational. We live first in relationship to God, so that our own identity and well-being is assured in the knowledge that God loves us. We live in relationship with all people, respecting every person as a member of one vast human family in which the well-being of all depends on the well-being of each. From this concept of family stems all our endeavours for reconciliation, justice, peace and the well-being of all.

We live also in relationship with all creation. The universe and planet Earth are a gift to be appreciated, nourished and sustained so as to provide life for future generations. Human beings are not the sole beneficiaries of Earth's resources so that we act selfishly or exploitatively with regard to those resources.

Currently at the Britomart Transport Centre in Auckland there is a very striking outdoor display of billboards from all over the world with the theme of Co-Existence. One is called Human Beans, and has a bean pod with four beans – black, yellow, brown and white. Linked quotations

go with each display. On one Albert Einstein is quoted .... *A human being is part of the universe, but experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest....This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our own personal desires, and to affection for only the few people near to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings, and all of nature.*

On another poster Archbishop Desmond Tutu is quoted .... *We have come to a time in the history of the world where we need to rediscover the path to peace, and the path to peace can never be war. This pathway is lined with the concept of co-existence and co-inhabitation of the world.*

Such words are particularly appropriate at this moment in history when the boundaries between nations, cultures and religions are breaking down, and we are coming face to face with histories and traditions of which we know little. To embrace a spirituality which nourishes within us compassion for others, and a commitment to see justice and peace prevail for all peoples, is of great importance.

In 1988 the Royal Commission for Social Policy received a submission from a Wellingtonian, Cathy Benland, a Quaker woman who wrote on what she called the S-Factor - Taha Wairua. The S stands for Spirit, and Cathy sought to collate those elements which most Kiwis would regard as lying at the spiritual heart of their existence. The list included:

- freedom of conscience and belief
- a sense of the sacredness of one's own self and body, and that of others
- a sense of relationship among human beings
- belonging to a family, community or whanau
- tenderness and compassion to the weak and needy
- love for the earth, its rivers, mountains and bush, and its various life forms
- a feeling of awe in the face of the mystery of existence.

If aspirations of this kind can be the source of our national life, and our global participation, then I believe we are living the essence of what it means to be spiritual.

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