



International Social Survey Programme

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) involves leading academic institutions in 43 countries in an annual survey of economic and social policy issues. New Zealand is represented in the ISSP by Massey University. Each year the ISSP member countries carry out a 30-minute survey using the same questionnaire. The data from these surveys are deposited in central archives in Cologne and Madrid where they are freely available to all members. This collection of data enables researchers to examine similarities and differences between countries, and to monitor changes over time.

The ISSP addresses a different topic each year in a roughly seven-year cycle. Previous topics have included the roles of men and women in society, social networks, social equality, citizenship, work orientation, the environment, national identity and sport and leisure. In 2008, the seventeenth year New Zealand has been involved in the ISSP, the topic was Religion, a repeat of surveys previously conducted in 1991 and 1998.

Survey Details

Between August and November 2008, a nationwide mail survey was conducted of 2040 people aged 18 and over, randomly selected from the New Zealand Electoral Roll. The survey produced 1027 valid responses, an effective response rate of 52%. A sample of this size has a maximum error margin at the 95% confidence level of approximately plus or minus 3%.

Though the sample was representative of a wide spectrum of New Zealand society, young people were under-represented and women were over-represented. To correct these biases the survey data were weighted so that the age-sex distribution of the sample matched that of the New Zealand population. As well as questioning respondents on their religious beliefs and practices, the survey also asked for their views on various social issues including religious education.

Beliefs about God

Most New Zealanders (just over 50%) believe in God, though half of these people have some doubts; about 20% do not believe in a personal God but believe in a higher power of some kind, while 30% either do not believe in God or do not know if there is one (see Table 1). Forty percent of respondents believe there is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally, and for 20% life is meaningful only because God exists.

Table 1. Beliefs about God

Statement	%
I know God exists and I have no doubts about it	27
While I have doubts, I feel I do believe in God	18
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	8
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind	19
I don't know if there is a God and I don't believe there is a way to find out	15
I don't believe in God	13

Beliefs about the Bible

While the Bible is regarded as the basis of Christian teachings, few people believe it should be interpreted literally. About 40% of those surveyed consider the Bible to be an ancient book of fables, legends and moral teachings recorded by man. A similar proportion believe the Bible is the word of God, but relatively few believe that what is written in the Bible should be taken word for word (see Table 2).

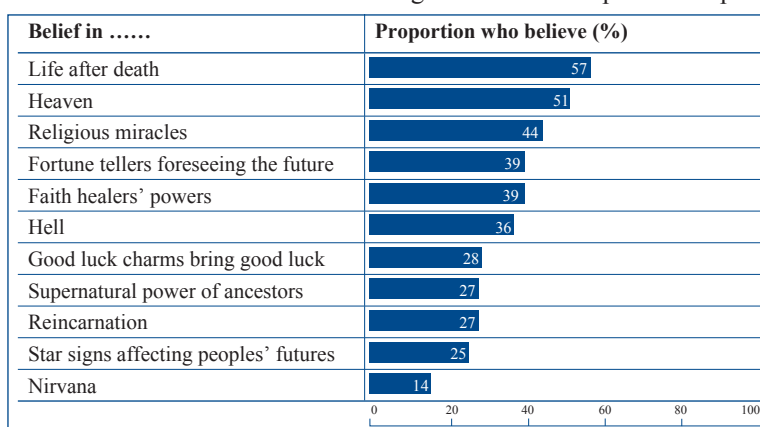
Table 2. Beliefs about the Bible

Statement	%
The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends and moral teachings recorded by man	42
The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word	33
The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word	8
This does not apply to me	12
Can't choose	6



Other Beliefs

Most New Zealanders (57%) believe in life after death and half believe in heaven; significant numbers also believe in religious miracles (44%) and in hell (36%). Just over a quarter believe in reincarnation – being reborn in this world over and over again – and the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, but less than 15% believe in Nirvana, the perfect state of peace of mind and freedom from suffering.



Many New Zealanders are also superstitious; nearly 40% believe some fortune tellers can really foresee the future and that some faith healers have God-given healing powers, while just under 30% believe good luck charms sometimes bring good luck and 25% believe a person's star sign at birth can affect the course of their future.

Figure 1. Beliefs

Just over 45% of those surveyed believe in the Darwinian position that human beings evolved over time from earlier forms of animals through a process of natural selection; 20% believe that humans were created in their present form directly by God. Only 15% subscribe to the 'intelligent design' idea that humans are too complex to have come about through evolution alone, so a purposeful force or intelligent being must have been involved (the remaining 15% were undecided). However, respondents were much less familiar with intelligent design than with evolution or creationism, and in previous surveys belief in 'theistic evolution', the idea that humans have developed over millions of years, but God guided this process, was at a similar level to belief in Darwinian evolution.

Most of those surveyed (70%) believe there are basic truths in many religions, just over 10% believe there is very little truth in any religion and 5% consider there is truth only in only one religion (the rest have no clear view). However, most respondents (70%) agree that religions bring more conflict than peace around the world and that people with strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others (80%). Nevertheless, most respondents (75%) believe we must respect all religions and that religious extremists should be allowed to publish books (65%) and to hold public meetings to express their views (50%).

Role of Religion in Society

If a law were passed that conflicted with their religious principles and teachings, 30% of those surveyed said they would follow their religious principles, while 25% said they would follow the law (35% said they had no religious principles and the rest said they couldn't choose).

Half of New Zealanders think that churches and religious organisations have about the right amount of power in our country, 15% believe they have too much, and 10% too little (the rest are undecided). Most people (75%) agree that religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections, or to influence government decisions (65% agree).

Nevertheless, most respondents (60%) would prefer children to have some religious education in state primary schools, and half would support some religious education in state secondary schools. Among those who support some form of curriculum-based religious education in schools, strongest support is for teaching about all faiths, not just Christianity (see Table 3). Thus, while there is relatively little support for purely Christian education in state schools, there is quite widespread support for children to be taught about religion in our schools.

Table 3. Religious education in state schools

What sort of religious education would you prefer in?	%
State Primary Schools	
No religious education in state schools	31
Introducing religion (Christianity and other faiths) within the school curriculum	29
Voluntary instruction by ministers and trained Christian lay people	17
Christian education within the school curriculum	14
Don't know/Can't choose	9
State Secondary Schools	
No religious education in state schools	39
Religious studies (all faiths) as a curriculum subject	36
Religious education (Christian) as a curriculum subject	13
Don't know/Can't choose	12

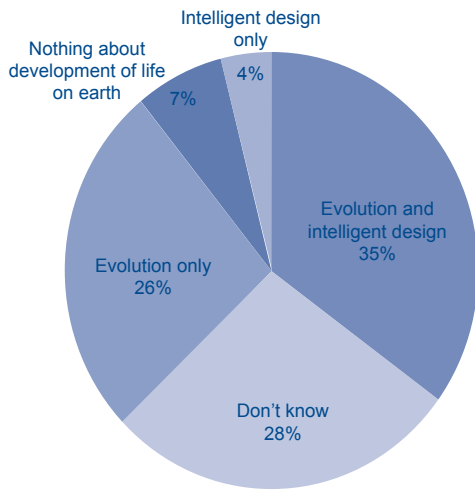


Figure 2. What should be taught in schools

As far as what should be taught in New Zealand state schools about the origin and development of life on earth is concerned, many people (nearly 30%) are unsure (see Figure 2). Among those with a firm view, half believe schools should teach both evolution and intelligent design, a small number believe they should teach nothing or intelligent design only, while the remainder favour schools teaching about evolution only.

Relatively few respondents (10%) consider that religion as a whole is increasing its influence on New Zealand life; 45% believe it is losing its influence; the rest either think it is neither increasing nor losing its influence (30%) or don't know. Among those who believe religion is losing its influence, less than 20% think this is a good thing, while 50% think it is a bad thing.

Religiosity

About 35% of New Zealanders describe themselves as 'religious'; the rest either describe themselves as non-religious (35%) or neutral (30%). These self-perceptions are generally reflected in the level of involvement New Zealanders have in religious activities. Fifty percent of New Zealanders pray at least several times a year, including 25% who pray several times a week; however, 40% never attend a religious service, only 20% regularly attend a service more than once a month, and 55% never take part in church activities other than attending services. But 45% of respondents said they have other ways of connecting with God without churches or religious services, and more than 10% had made some personal sacrifice during the year, such as fasting, following a special diet, or giving up some activity during a holy season, as an expression of their faith.

We often hear of people who have had a turning point in their lives. In this country, 25% of respondents said there had been such an event when they had made a new and personal commitment to religion, and 20% said they had been 'born again', or had a 'born again' experience, a turning point in their lives when they had committed themselves to Christ.

Morality

Most New Zealanders (90%) think it is almost always wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than their spouse, but only 40% think sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is wrong. This latter figure is 10% less than in 1998, which suggests that attitudes to homosexuality have become more liberal over the last 10 years. Sixty five percent of New Zealanders do not think it is wrong at all for men and women to have sex before marriage, and this proportion is 10% higher than it was in 1998.

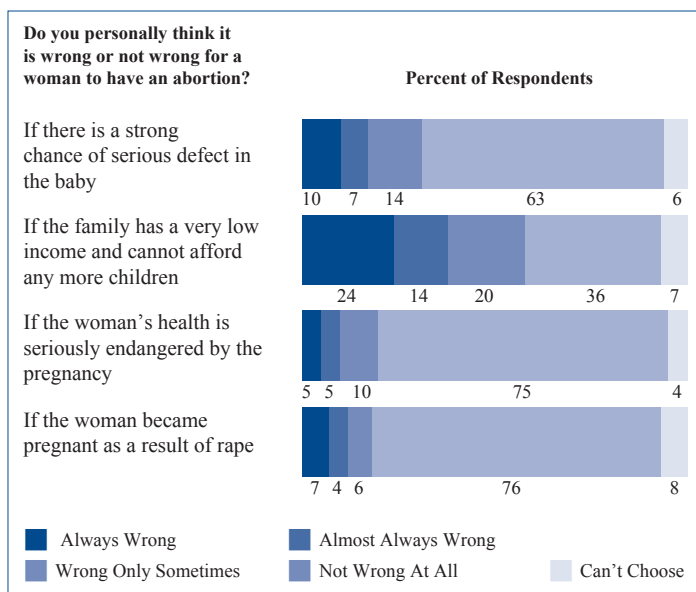


Figure 3. Attitudes to Abortion

New Zealanders' opinions on abortion also generally tend to be liberal. Seventy five percent of those surveyed do not think it is wrong at all for a woman to have an abortion if the woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy or the woman became pregnant as a result of rape; around 65% feel the same way if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby but only 36% think it is not wrong at all if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children. In general, the proportion of New Zealanders who think abortion is always wrong is between 5% and 10%, depending on the circumstances, though this proportion rises to 25% if the reason is that the family cannot afford any more children (see Figure 3).

Perhaps not surprisingly, young people are more tolerant of sex before marriage than older people; they are also more accepting than older people of homosexuality. However, age has no effect on attitudes to abortion. Women are less tolerant than men of sex before marriage and adultery, but much more accepting of homosexuality, while there is little or no difference in men's and women's views on abortion.

Seventy percent of New Zealanders support assisted suicide for someone with a painful incurable disease, provided a doctor gives the assistance. However, support drops to 50% for suicide assisted by someone else, such as a close relative, and opposition increases from just over 15% to just under 35%.

Age and Gender Effects and Trends

Older New Zealanders tend to be more religious than younger New Zealanders. Those over 55 are more likely than those under 35 to have a religious affiliation, to believe in God and to believe that the Bible is the literal word of God. There is little difference in belief in a higher power among different age groups, but those under 35 are less likely to believe in intelligent design, whereas those over 55 are more likely to believe in this explanation of the origin and development of human beings.

New Zealand men are less religious than New Zealand women, though the extent to which this is manifested varies depending on how religiosity is measured. Men are less likely than women to believe in God and more likely to say they have no religious affiliation; women are more likely to believe in creationism, while men are more likely to believe in evolution and less likely than women to believe that the Bible is the literal word of God.

Since 1991, when the first of our religion surveys was conducted, New Zealanders appear to have become less religious, at least in a formal sense, and more liberal on some social issues. The proportion of New Zealanders who said they have no religious affiliation increased from 29% among those surveyed in 1991 to 40% in 2008. Similarly, fewer New Zealanders now say they believe in God than did 17 years ago. However, there has been no change in the proportion of respondents who say they believe in a higher power. So perhaps the apparent decline in religiosity reflects a decline in traditional religious loyalties rather than a decline in the religiosity as such.

Summary

The general view that New Zealand is a very secular country is supported by the relatively low levels of active involvement in religion of most New Zealanders. Furthermore, there is some evidence that New Zealanders have become less religious over the last 17 years. Nevertheless, a sizeable minority of New Zealanders still describe themselves as religious, pray regularly and regularly attend religious services. The majority of New Zealanders also believe in God, pray at least once a year and attend religious service at least as frequently.

Very few New Zealanders believe the Bible is literally the word of God, but most believe in life after death and in heaven. Most New Zealanders believe in evolution as the explanation for the development of life on earth; however, half of these believe that God guided this process. Most New Zealanders are not in favour of churches and religious organisations having more power, or of religious leaders trying to influence voting in elections or government decisions. Despite this, there is quite widespread support for religious education in state schools, provided this involves all faiths, not just Christianity.

On some social issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, and premarital sex, New Zealanders' views are generally liberal, and there has been an increasing tolerance of homosexuality since 1991. However, most New Zealanders still regard adultery as wrong.

About the Authors

Members of the Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing involved in this survey were: Professor Philip Gendall (Professor of Marketing) and Dr Benjamin Healey.

Access to data from previous ISSP surveys conducted in New Zealand: Religion, 1991 and 1998; Social Inequality, 1992 and 1999; The Environment, 1993 and 2000; The Roles of Men and Women in Society, 1994 and 2002; National Identity, 1996 and 2003; The Role of Government and Work Orientation, 1997; Social Networks, 2001; Citizenship, 2004; Work Orientation, 2005; Role of Government, 2006; Sport and Leisure, 2007; is available through the Department of Communication, Journalism & Marketing, Massey University