



Religious Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand

Statement on Religious Diversity

Fourth Edition



July 2026

Origins of the Statement

Following the 2004 Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the New Zealand Interfaith Delegation recognised the need for more open dialogue and discussion about religious diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand, and our radically changing religious demography. A national statement on religious diversity was proposed, and in 2006, the first statement was developed through public dialogue, and consultation and workshops with faith and interfaith groups. It was endorsed by the National Interfaith Forum in Hamilton and published by Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission in 2007. The second edition was published in 2009, and a third edition was endorsed by the National Interfaith Forum in Wellington and published in 2019.

Acknowledgments

This fourth edition of the Statement on Religious Diversity was led by the Race Relations Commissioner and developed by Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission in consultation with a wide range of faith and interfaith communities across Aotearoa New Zealand. We thank them for their invaluable insights, contributions and time. This edition builds on the text of the third edition, originally drafted by Emeritus Professor Paul Morris following public discussion, and aims to reflect the experiences and aspirations of our faith and interfaith communities in 2026. We also acknowledge the key role of the Religious Diversity Centre in coordinating endorsement from the National Interfaith Forum for previous editions, as well as the contributions of partner organisations and former colleagues to those editions.

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Foreword

Religion is a central part of the lives of many New Zealanders. Our country is home to a rich diversity of religions and faiths, across our largest cities and our smallest towns, and they all have a place here. These faiths build supportive communities and play an important role in strengthening social cohesion in New Zealand.

First published in 2007, the Statement on Religious Diversity sets out the principles that underpin a free society in which people can express their faith. It provides a foundation for discussion of religious issues, not only among faith communities, but also across wider New Zealand society. It encourages respectful dialogue, education and positive relationships between faith-based communities, government and New Zealand society as we work towards a more inclusive society.

Around the world, we continue to see division, intolerance, and harmful rhetoric directed at different communities. This makes it even more important to express our support for free religious practice and encourage peaceful expression of faith. We reject racism, xenophobia and hatred in all its forms, and will stand up for the freedom of all New Zealanders to practise their beliefs within the law.

Religious and faith communities from all over the world continue to make a positive contribution to our society. New Zealand is a stronger, more welcoming place thanks to our diverse faith groups. This year's statement reaffirms the right of all religious and faith communities to practise their beliefs and traditions free from discrimination and harassment.

All faith communities, and those who profess no religion, are equal before the law in our country. I commend this year's statement to all New Zealanders as a basis for further discussion, reflection and mutual respect.

I hope that this statement will encourage all New Zealanders, whatever their faith or background, to feel comfortable to practise their beliefs in peace and within the law, and to respect the right of others to do the same.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Luxon', written over a horizontal line.

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon

Prime Minister

July 2026

The following statement provides a framework for the recognition of Aotearoa New Zealand’s diverse faith communities and their harmonious interaction with each other, with government and with other groups in society:

1. The State and Religion

The State has a duty to treat all faith communities and those who profess no faith equally before the law.

2. The Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief

Everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand has the right to freedom of religion and belief and the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religious or ethical belief.

3. The Right to Safety

Faith communities and their members have a right to safety and security. This includes being and feeling safe physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually as a person of faith.

4. The Right to Freedom of Expression

The right to freedom of expression is vital for democracy and should be exercised with responsibility.

5. Recognition and Accommodation

Recognition and reasonable accommodation for the diverse beliefs and practices of faith communities in education, work and public service environments enable equal participation in society for all.

6. Education

Education should promote understanding and awareness of different faith, religious, and spiritual traditions, reflecting the diversity of our local communities and wider national context.

7. Religious Diversity

Religious diversity means respecting the different ways faith is understood, expressed and lived in a multi-faith society.

8. Cooperation and Understanding

Government and faith communities have a responsibility to build and maintain positive relationships with each other, and to promote mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation.

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand is home to people of diverse beliefs, faiths, religions, spiritualities, philosophies and traditions,¹ including those who have no affiliation with any faith. This statement reaffirms our commitment as a country to religious diversity and recognises the positive contributions of faith communities, and the important role they play in strengthening social cohesion.

As our founding constitutional document, the significance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi endures for faith communities in shaping how spirituality and faith is understood and lived in Aotearoa New Zealand. Acknowledging the place of wairuatanga (Māori spirituality) and its role in the history and identity of our country is seen by faith communities as fundamental in providing a place for all faiths to belong here. Many faith communities have embarked on a journey to honour and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi. For some, this includes recognising an oral agreement at Waitangi that affirmed religious freedom. This oral agreement is referred to by some as the fourth article of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and is understood as the historical foundation for acknowledging the rights of diverse faiths in this country.

Tangata whenua, the first people of this land, observed religious and spiritual practices often closely associated with the natural environment. Māori-led spiritual movements including Pai Mārire, Ringatū, and Rātana, have made significant spiritual, political and social contributions to our history, and have a

¹ Referred to collectively as ‘faiths’ throughout this statement. We acknowledge that in our multi-faith society, people subscribe to a wide range of faiths, traditions and beliefs. They vary from being religious in nature, to being expressed as a philosophy, ethic, spirituality or tradition.

unique role as faith movements born in Aotearoa New Zealand. Today, wairuatanga remains a unique and integral part of life.

Historically, Aotearoa New Zealand has been a predominantly Christian society, and this history continues to influence many of our values, norms, systems and institutions today. However, many faith communities have a long and rich history here — some since the early 1800s, and some more recently arrived — all of whom continue to influence and shape our society in their own ways.

Our faith landscape has shifted significantly over the years: for the first time since the New Zealand census began collecting religious affiliation, just over half of New Zealanders recorded 'no religion' (51.6%) in the 2023 census. The data shows that the number of Christians continues to decline, while the growth in Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities reflect shifts in our immigration settings. While an increasing number of New Zealanders are not affiliated with any faith, for many (45%) it continues to play an integral role in the way they choose to live their lives. Christianity remains the largest faith community at 32.3% of the total population, followed by Hindu Dharma (2.9%), Islam (1.5%), Māori religions and movements (1.3%), Buddhism (1.1%), Sikhism (1.1%), Spiritualism and New Age religions (0.45%), 'other religions' (including Bahá'í, Theism, Zoroastrian and Jainism) 0.2%, and Judaism (0.1%).

An increasingly globalised world means we are more connected to one another than ever. While faith affiliation is steadily declining in Western nations, globally, faith affiliation is increasing with most faith communities continuing to grow, particularly in the Global South.

Many domestic faith communities are affiliated with central governing bodies and networks overseas and maintain strong relationships with their respective communities abroad. This interconnectedness increasingly means that global conflicts and events can deeply affect faith communities here in Aotearoa New Zealand, both in the way they live and practice their faith, and how they might engage with one another.

Faith communities have made and continue to make significant and varied contributions both locally, nationally and internationally. They help welcome, house, feed, clothe, care and support people in our communities, including some of our most vulnerable. When faith communities mobilise, they are often a powerful force of positive change and influence. Faith provides meaning and purpose in people's lives, and fosters inclusion, connection and a sense of belonging, all of which are important contributions to strengthening social cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is in this context that the right to freedom of religion and belief, together with associated responsibilities, must be recognised and upheld. As affirmed in international instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, this right includes the right to hold a belief, change one's religion or belief, express one's religion or belief (either individually or in community with others), and the right not to hold a belief. These rights are reaffirmed domestically in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993. The right to freedom of religion and belief entails affording this right to all people and not infringing upon the right of any individual or community.

Commentary on the Statement



1. The State and Religion

The State has a duty to treat all faith communities, and those who profess no faith, equally before the law.

The State has a responsibility to recognise and treat with equal dignity and respect those who hold a faith, and those who have none. It is expected to be neutral and not privilege or disadvantage one faith over another, or people of faith over those who have none, and vice versa. This is guaranteed domestically in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act and the Human Rights Act.

Aotearoa New Zealand has no official state faith; however, some historical and symbolic elements of particular faiths are embedded in our social and cultural norms. We are generally considered a secular country, with many New Zealanders likely unaware of our rich faith diversity. In a modern, multi-faith society like ours, secularism can be understood as being non-preferential — not privileging a particular faith, belief or no faith, but allowing space for all to live together harmoniously.

In reflection of the many cultural, social and economic contributions faith communities make, the State should actively engage faith communities as key partners in building a safe and cohesive country. This requires the State to understand and work with faith communities as faith communities, and to respect the diversity between and within each community.



2. The Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief

Everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand has the right to freedom of religion and belief, and the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religious or ethical belief.

The State plays an important role in ensuring that faith communities can practice and express their faith privately and publicly, and protect their ability to do so free from discrimination. This includes the right to hold, change, or leave a faith, or to have none; to express that faith or belief; and to practice that faith and belief within the law. These rights are affirmed in international human rights conventions that New Zealand is a party to, as well as in our domestic legislation including the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act and the Human Rights Act.

While this right is formally recognised in law, some faith communities, particularly smaller communities, experience barriers to freedom of religion and belief in practice. Often due to their small size, or lack of public visibility and understanding, laws and policies can lead to indirect discrimination and unintended disadvantage. Flexibility, exemptions, or reasonable amendments to laws and policies are encouraged to enable faith communities to fulfil their religious obligations.

In a pluralistic, diverse society, friction can also arise between legal frameworks, social norms, and a person or community's faith beliefs and obligations. A balance must be struck to allow for faith communities to genuinely practice, express, and sustain their beliefs in both public and private life, while

also respecting the law and the rights of other individuals and communities in our society. Faith communities have shared responsibilities towards one another and towards non-faith communities, and vice versa, to respect each other's dignity and rights and to hold space to disagree without exclusion.



3. The Right to Safety

Faith communities and their members have a right to safety and security. This includes being and feeling safe physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually as a person of faith.

The State and faith communities have a shared responsibility for ensuring that all faith communities can live, express, practice, and identify as their faith freely and without fear. This emerged as particularly important in Aotearoa New Zealand in the aftermath of the March 15 2019 terror attacks, when members of our Muslim community were killed because of their faith. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that no community experiences this tragedy again.

Many faith communities report growing hatred, intolerance, abuse and harassment towards their community in recent years, and tie this to the increasing normalisation of hateful sentiment and behaviour in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially online. The desecration, degradation, or destruction of sacred spaces and symbols carries deep spiritual impact beyond material and financial damage. Domestic and international conflicts further contribute to inflaming tensions between and within faith and non-faith communities.

This impacts on everyone’s sense of safety, belonging, and inclusion in our society.

All faith communities require active protection and support from the State to ensure their safety. While experiences and perceptions of fear, risk, security, and concern vary across faith communities in form, intensity, and frequency, the real-world impact on people and communities is the same. Many members of faith communities feel unable to attend their places of worship or observance, or gather as a community safely, or to live, practice or express publicly the faith that constitutes a core part of their identity.

Faith communities also have responsibilities to ensure the wellbeing of their members. These responsibilities include safeguarding children, young people, and vulnerable individuals; preventing harm and abuse and responding appropriately when it occurs; reducing risks of incitement, radicalisation, or foreign interference; and ensuring that places of worship, observance and gathering remain inclusive and non-partisan.



4. The Right to Freedom of Expression

The right to freedom of expression is vital for democracy and should be exercised with responsibility.

The right to freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, key to a vibrant, cohesive, and democratic Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes both the right to express your faith and for others to express their views about your faith.

It helps to realise other human rights for faith communities — such as the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly — and enables participation in public life, access to information, and accountability for those in power. While freedom of expression has strong domestic and international legal protections, including under the New Zealand Bill of Rights, it is not absolute. This right must be exercised responsibly and consistently with other human rights obligations to ensure that it does not become a vehicle for discrimination, incitement, or the erosion of social cohesion, while still allowing for legitimate dissent, criticism, advocacy, and debate. Respectful expression and dialogue do not require agreement or endorsement of any particular faith or belief, rather, it allows room for difference and disagreement, which is crucial in a well-functioning, pluralistic society.

For many faith communities, the growth of digital spaces and new technologies have meant increased ability to participate and connect with one another. However, these technological advances have also become a source of harm, amplifying risk for faith communities, with the potential for online rhetoric to translate quickly into harmful offline behaviour.

Most online harm falls below legal thresholds of incitement, abuse or harassment, but has a deep impact on faith communities' sense of safety and belonging. Acknowledging that the scale, speed, and global nature of online harm present significant challenges to regulators and policy makers, as well as to the public at large, increased online safety measures, regulation, and preventative education from the State is needed urgently to address these issues. In addition, a commitment from faith communities to promote ethical, respectful and responsible use of technology is also necessary.

As key actors shaping public discourse, media (including traditional news, digital, social and interactive media, and faith community media platforms) also have a duty to report about faith communities responsibly, accurately, and fairly, and to ensure diversity in their representation and sources.



5. Recognition and Accommodation

Recognition and reasonable accommodation for the diverse beliefs and practices of faith communities in education, work and public service environments enables equal participation in society for all.

When educational institutions, workplaces, and public services recognise and accommodate the diverse beliefs and practices of both faith and non-faith communities equally, everyone can participate fully in everyday life. Systems and processes designed to meet the needs of our diverse communities ensure all communities feel they belong, and this, in turn, strengthens social cohesion.

In practice, some faith communities continue to experience systemic barriers, which have an impact on their ability to live and express their faith in everyday life. Increased awareness and understanding of days of significance, dress requirements, symbolic items, prayer times and spaces, and dietary requirements empowers organisations to better uphold the rights of faith communities, and ensures equality and fairness for both faith and non-faith communities. Our increasing diversity means the requirements of different faiths are becoming more

visible and pressing, emphasising the need for systems and processes to adapt to remain responsive to our changing demographics. In turn, faith communities have a responsibility to engage constructively and exercise these rights through dialogue, compromise, and mutual respect.



6. Education

Education should promote understanding and awareness of different faith, religious, and spiritual traditions, reflecting the diversity of our local communities and wider national context.

Education builds understanding between people, supports informed and respectful engagement, and strengthens belonging for all faith communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has the potential to reduce misunderstandings and misconceptions of faiths and faith communities, and addresses ignorance that can often lead to fear, prejudice and discrimination. Education is essential to fostering relationships, empathy and mutual respect within and between faith and non-faith communities, and it helps us to live together harmoniously.

With the exception of faith-based state-integrated schools and some charter schools that are mandated to teach religious instruction under the Education and Training Act 2020, all state schools are secular.

This provides an opportunity for comparative education on faith communities in our country, focusing on awareness and understanding rather than adherence. Teaching about diverse faiths should reflect the school community itself, the wider local community in which the school is located, and the national community of which we are all a part.

This could include teaching about faith communities' commonalities and differences, and their long histories and varied contributions in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is important that faiths are taught accurately, fairly, without bias, and through engagement with faith communities directly. Teachers and school leaders should be empowered and equipped to teach sensitively, accurately, and confidently about faith and faith communities with adequate resourcing and support. Students who opt out of religious instruction or comparative education about faiths should be protected from pressure, stigma, or disadvantage.

Outside of formal education settings, people learn about faith and faith communities in varied ways, including online. This can lead to misinformation and the oversimplification of understanding around different faiths and faith communities. Education about the diverse faiths and faith communities in our country should extend to workplaces and community organisations to deepen public understanding and improve the ways we respond to our increasing faith diversity as a nation.



7. Religious Diversity

Religious diversity means respecting the different ways faith is understood, expressed and lived in a multi-faith society.

As a multi-faith society, respecting the different ways we practise faith, or not, requires us to recognise the inherent dignity and humanity of each person. Faith informs people's values and their deeply held convictions and beliefs, which can manifest in different ways. Navigating difference with respect and building our practical capability to live well with difference benefits everyone. This includes recognising that difference or disagreement is a normal, legitimate and welcome feature of a democratic society. It is of critical importance that we allow for respectful disagreement, while rejecting expression or conduct that undermines the dignity and safety of others.

A commitment to open dialogue, constructive engagement, and respectful disagreement enables diversity to thrive. This requires all faith and non-faith communities to practice active listening, humility, and mutual care, and to commit to building relationships across difference. Additionally, challenging oversimplified or inaccurate understandings of faiths means recognising the diversity of views, experiences, understandings, and practices within each faith community and recognising that often no single voice or organisation is representative of an entire faith.



8. Cooperation and Understanding

Government and faith communities have a responsibility to build and maintain positive relationships with each other, and to promote mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation.

Active cooperation and shared responsibilities between the State and faith communities requires a shift from dialogue alone towards practical, collaborative action. Faith communities play a central role in strengthening social cohesion. They require ongoing commitment from the government to engage consistently and broadly, and to include them in shared decision-making.

Social cohesion is relational: it is about how communities know one another, not just what communities know about one another. Inter-faith and intra-faith relationships are critical to fostering social cohesion and require communities' ongoing and active participation, visibility, and inclusion. Shared values such as compassion, justice, peace and service provide a foundation for cooperation and partnership across faiths. These values support social cohesion in action, and encourage us to stand together in unity, provide mutual support across communities, and share collective responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of all communities. Interfaith organisations have led the way in modelling this in practice, while many individual faith organisations continue to make their own contributions to community wellbeing and social cohesion.

Endorsements

Alternative Jewish Voices/Sh'ma Koleinu

Auckland Inter-Faith Council

Beth Shalom: The Progressive Jewish Community of Auckland

Bishop Ross Bay on behalf of the Anglican Diocese
of Auckland

Dawoodi Bohra Community of New Zealand

Dayenu: New Zealand Jews Against Occupation

Dunedin Interfaith Council

Hindu Council of New Zealand

His Highness Prince Aga Khan Shia Imami Ismaili Council for
Australia and New Zealand

Islamic Council of New Zealand

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand

New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

New Zealand Central Sikh Association

New Zealand Council of Sikh Affairs

New Zealand Jewish Council

Palmerston North Interfaith Group

Pearl of the Islands Foundation Inc.

Religious Studies Teachers' Association of Aotearoa
New Zealand

Soka Gakkai International NZ

Spiritualism New Zealand

Supreme Sikh Society of New Zealand

Te Haahi Ratana

Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa | Methodist Church of
New Zealand

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand

Waikato Interfaith Council

Wellington Abrahamic Council of Jews, Christians,
and Muslims

Wellington Interfaith Council

Wellington Progressive Jewish Congregation/Temple Sinai

Zarathushtrian Association of New Zealand Incorporated



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Further information about the Statement and
previous editions is available at tikatangata.org.nz

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The Diversity Fern was originally designed for Race Relations Day 2005 by Malaysian-born New Zealand designer Jean Voon.

The fern represents the growing diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand.