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Our Two “Established” Religions.

The *Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue*, held at Waitangi earlier this year, pointed up some of the ironies which have developed in New Zealand’s own relationship between Church and State.

The major functionaries were somewhat upstaged by the presence of the Destiny Church who were protesting that Christianity was a well-established religion in New Zealand and that the Prime Minister was wrong to say otherwise. Others joined in the cry.

The confusion is understandable. There can be no doubt that the Christian faith and church has been well established in New Zealand since European settlement. However, I presume the Prime Minister and others were using the term in the sense of the First Amendment to the US Constitution which says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof... .”

There is a difference between “being established” and “having been established by the State”.

The US Information Service recognizes the tension built into the First Amendment, which tells Congress neither to establish a religion nor to interfere with religious practice. Steering a course between these two dictates is a delicate exercise and some of the inherent contradictions, such as school and Congressional prayers, remain unresolved after 200 years of US Governance.

We should not expect to resolve the same tensions in New Zealand after a few days exchanging “principles”.

The Prime Minister laid out a set of principles which included the declaration “That all faiths and beliefs should be treated equally before the law.”

In New Zealand this is simply no longer the case. While the vast majority of Maori who express a religious belief in the census forms declare themselves to be Christians, (98% in the 2002 census) of one form or another, the Government has decided otherwise. If you turn to your District or Regional Planning Documents you will find a chapter titled something like “Maori Issues” which will contain the bald statement that “Maori believe ... ” and will go on to lay out the religious beliefs of pre-European Polynesian animism. Such declarations assume there is a direct correlation between ethnicity and belief. If a District or Regional Plan declared that all Irish are Catholics or that all Chinese are *Taoists* there would be outrage –

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and rightly so. But your District Plan – which has the force of regulation – declares all Maori are animists.

As the protestations of the Destiny Church made clear, a higher percentage of Maori are Christian than are Pakeha – even though government regulations declare otherwise. Furthermore, the beliefs of this animist religion are built into planning documents and can be enforced over non-believers – Maori and Pakeha alike.

So while we might not have an “established” state religion in New Zealand we certainly have a religion which is endorsed by the State and whose beliefs are enforceable over others by law. Curiously this State-endorsed religion barely figures in the census responses. So we have endorsed the one religion which appears to have no significant congregation.

However, while the State has endorsed a religion which no congregation, it has also endorsed a religion which has a huge congregation but no “Church”.

This new world-wide religion is advocated by the extreme environmentalists. While the majority of New Zealanders are environmentalists in that we recognize there is little point in being rich if you cannot swim in the sea, breathe the air, and eat the fruits of your garden, there is another group, who now put “nature” above the interests of humanity. We are subservient to the “interests” of anything “natural” and are encouraged to worship “The Earth Mother”.

Section 5 of the RMA says that people are to be enabled to provide for their own economic, social and cultural wellbeing, while at the same time protecting the natural and physical environment. However, as case law has developed, the interests of the people are totally trumped by those of nature. I have twice been in the Environment Court when a Barrister representing the local Council has argued that “Council can have no regard to the personal circumstances of the applicant” even though the applicants are simply trying to provide for the wellbeing of their young children. It seems we must concern ourselves with future generations but those recently born have no claim on resources and must give way to the interests of “nature”.

Where Have all the Young Ones Gone?

To their credit the Kaipara District Council holds regular meetings at which Councillors and Staff can present their current ideas and achievements to local practitioners and other interested parties for comment and feedback.

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At one of these meetings last week Council handed out its new policy document on “Roading Development Contributions”.

Under powers granted by the new Local Government Act, Councils can now charge “developers” with substantial levies (fines), for providing new lots and dwellings in the District.

Under the RMA financial impact levies must be a direct result of the proposal. But under this new regime the levies can be used to fund roading and other infrastructure, such as libraries sports grounds and busways, anywhere in the District.

These levies were first introduced in the US after the passing of the Civil Rights Legislation which prohibited the use of planning rules to zone Blacks and Hispanics out of white neighbourhoods. California’s original "Anti-Growth Levies" were a means of pricing them out instead.

The Federal Court struck them down – so we now provide a home for them in New Zealand.

For the last several months, following the findings of the *Demographia* surveys, the affordability of housing has been a major issue and topic of debate throughout the country. The Governor of the Reserve Bank is having to punish the whole economy because of rising house prices.

Development levies are sold to the public on the grounds that “Greedy developers will now have to pay for the costs of their development”. But, of course developers don't pay these so called “development levies”. They pass the cost on to the customers, or, if they find their developments become unprofitable, simply don't proceed with their projects and deny customers access to houses they might otherwise have been able to afford.

The end result is that Kaipara District Council is about add to about \$13,000 (about \$10,000 plus profit and loss) to the cost of every new dwelling in much of the District starting from July 1st. Of course, if you add to the costs of new housing in any area the price of the total housing stock rises as a consequence.

This is happening all round the country. Indeed one justification for Kaipara's action is that “everyone else is doing it”.

So we can look forward to another round of interest rate hikes and our exporters can look forward to a climbing exchange rate until eventually the economy turns belly-up under the impact of this ever increasing cycles of increased costs.

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In the meantime Councils who impose such levies are saying to potential newcomers, “If you try to come and live in our District we will treat you as a burden, and fine you for deciding to live here.”

Don't be surprised if they go somewhere else.

Actually new citizens are not a burden. They bring new investment, new skills, and pay their local body rates – and that is how the great cities of the world were built.

We seem determined to drive all our young people out of New Zealand and to other jurisdictions where they are made more welcome.

It's all very well for the comfortably-retired to fine newcomers, in an attempt to keep down their own rates, but who do they think will pay the taxes to fund their pensions and health care in the future?

One day they will surely ask “Where have all the young ones gone?”