

New Religion Adherents: An Overview of Anglophone Census and Survey Data

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General estimates of the extent of the New Religions phenomenon vary considerably. The two basic quantitative questions in this area are: How many groups? And, How many people? These questions are not as simple as they might at first appear. A more fundamental question involves classification: Where does one draw the line between alternative and non-alternative religions? What one finds when one actually tries to determine where to draw such a line is that the difference between “mainstream” and “alternative” is a matter of degree rather than a sharply-defined distinction.

The indeterminacy of this dividing line allows anticultists like the late Margaret Singer to assert, without fear of direct contradiction, that as many as twenty million people have been involved in three to five thousand cults in the United States (Singer and Lalich 1995). In contrast, Gordon Melton estimates five to six hundred alternative religions in the United States (Melton 1992). Similarly, Peter Clarke estimates four to five hundred new religions in the United Kingdom (Clarke 1984). The situation is rather different in Japan, where New Religions have been thriving since the end of WWII. Japanese sociologists estimate anywhere from eight hundred to several thousand (Arweck 2000) such groups. And finally, Eileen Barker puts forward a figure of two thousand or more New Religions in the West, and a figure in the lower tens of thousands worldwide (Barker 1999).

An important though neglected source of information bearing on the question of numbers of adherents to alternative religions is national census data. In 2001, the censuses of four English-speaking countries – New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom – collected information on religious membership that included select New Religions. There was also an important religion survey conducted in the United States in the same year, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS).

Though a few scholars of New Religions have referred to one or more of these censuses, no one has attempted a general survey. Following an examination of one estimate of world religious adherents, the current article examines census data for the light such data sheds on participation rates in alternative religions. In the final section of the paper, relevant data from the ARIS survey will also be examined.

World Membership in Alternative Religions

An example of how the ambiguity between what is and what is not a New Religion can produce incongruous results can be found in David Barrett and Todd Johnson's "A Statistical Approach to the World's Religious Adherents" (2002). In terms of worldwide membership, these statistics appear to be the best figures available.

Barrett and Johnson divide the world's religions into 19 categories, with three subcategories for Christianity: Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Independent), Muslim, Baha'i, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Confucian, Taoist, Chinese Folk Religion, Shinto, Spiritist, Ethnoreligionist, Atheist, Nonreligious, Neoreligionist, and Other. They describe the Neoreligionist (New Religionist) as "twentieth-century new religions, new religious movements, radical new crisis religions, and non-Christian syncretistic mass religions, all founded since 1800 and most since 1945, mostly Asian in origin and membership but increasingly with worldwide followings." The Other category is described as "a handful of smaller religions, quasi-religions, pseudo religions, parareligions, religious or mystic systems, religious and semireligious brotherhoods of numerous varieties." Though I sharply question the designation "pseudo religion," it otherwise appears that most of the religions classified as Other are also New Religions. Finally, they neglect to define the Spiritism category. However, because, according to their statistics, 12,039,000 of the world's 12,334,000 Spiritists are located in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is clear that this category is meant primarily to encompass Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian New Religions like Santeria and Umbanda.

Out of a total world population of 6,055,049,000 people, Barrett and Johnson find that 102,356,000 are members of New Religions, 12,334,000 are Spiritists and 1,067,000 are in the Other category, meaning about 1.9% of the world population belong to alternative religions. This figure does not sound unreasonable, until one discovers that almost all of the people in New Religions – 100,639,000 members – are Asian. In order to analyze and critique their statistics, it will be useful to lay out all of Barrett and Johnson's relevant figures for the year 2,000, continent by continent:

Table 1

Numbers of Members in New Religions Worldwide

	New Religions	Spiritism	Other	Total Population
Africa	28,400	2,500	65,700	784,445,000
Asia	100,639,000	1,900	62,100	3,682,550,000
Europe	158,000	133,000	236,000	728,887,000
Latin America	622,000	12,039,000	98,000	519,138,000
North America	845,000	151,000	597,000	309,631,000
Australia (& Oceania)	66,500	7,000	9,400	30,393,000

Their figure for Asian New Religions immediately strikes one as suspect. Even after being adjusted for population difference, the data still seems to indicate over ten times as many members of New Religions in Asia as in North America. This is probably the result of using different criteria for these two areas of the world. Barrett and Johnson almost certainly classified certain large groups like Soka Gakkai (Soka Gakkai has nine million members) as New Religions rather than as Buddhists. In contrast, they almost certainly classified the many new Protestant sects that are constantly coming into being in the United States as Christian rather than as New Religions.

Given the large number of New Religions in sub-Saharan Africa, their low figure for African New Religions is clearly off-base. Because African New Religions tend to draw heavily on traditional Ethnoreligions, Christianity, or both, Barrett and Johnson must have classified most of these religious groups as either Ethnoreligious or Christian.

The European figure also seems quite low. Because of the concern over alternative religions in Europe since the first Solar Temple tragedy in 1994, there have been a number of official government surveys, though results have been less satisfactory than one might have hoped. For example, in 1998 the German Parliament's Enquete Commission reported the results of a national survey which indicated that eight to nine million people considered themselves members of non-traditional religious groups. In contrast, the Swedish Government Report of 1998 put forward a national figure of 50,000-60,000 (about 0.15% of the population), exclusive of New Age groups – a considerably lower proportion than the German figure.

As for North America, using only the New Religions figure gives us slightly less than

0.3%. Alternately, adding all of the data from the New Religions, Spiritism and Other categories results in slightly more than 0.5%. As it turns out, the 0.3% - 0.5% range receives support from the national census statistics of other English-speaking countries.

New Zealand National Census Data

A number of countries have begun to include religious affiliation as part of their national censuses. One of the most useful is the 2001 New Zealand census because of the large number of distinct groups enumerated:

Table 2

Alternative Religion Statistics from the 2001 New Zealand Census

Religion	Number of Members
Zen Buddhism*	126
Sukyo Mahikari	111
Tenrikyo	12
Yoga	414
Hare Krishna	363
Animism**	213
Pantheism**	342
Nature and Earth-based Religions	2,961
Wiccan	2,196
Druidism	150
Satanism	891
Other New Age Religion	1,485
Rastafarianism	1,296
Sufi***	195
Scientology	282
Spiritualism	5,853
Liberal Catholic Church	135
Unification Church	153
Christian Science	258
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Total	17,436

* Like the Hare Krishna movement, Zen Buddhism is considered a New Religion when Westerners become involved.

** Both the New Zealand and the Australian Census identify Animism and Pantheism as Neo-Pagan religions for statistical purposes (e.g., in Table 3, the 2001 figure for the Nature and Earth Based category represents the sum of the Animism, Pantheism, Nature and Earth-based Religions, Wiccan and Druidism figures in Table 2). The religions of indigenous peoples were represented by other categories.

*** Few contemporary Muslims would self-identify as Sufis, indicating that all or most of the members of the Sufi category are members of one of several Sufi groups appealing primarily to Westerners. Like Western Zen Buddhism, Western Sufi groups are considered New Religions.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

The total of 17,436 members represents 0.46% of the 3,737,277 people who responded to the 2001 census, which compares favorably with the 0.3% to 0.5% participation rate for North America derived from the Barrett and Johnson data. This is being cautious. One could also make a reasonable argument for including Vineyard Christian Fellowship (sometimes called a “cult,” with 774 members in the census), some of the 1,107 people who self-identified as Taoist, and some of the 4,641 people who the census classified as simply Other Religion. This would bring the participation rate up to 0.5%. However, the New Zealand census allowed people to report more than one affiliation, and as a consequence the census collected 3,841,932 responses from a total of 3,737,277 people, or 104,655 extra responses. Though not all of these extra responses could have been supplied by individuals self-identifying as members of New Religions, it is reasonable to infer that there were enough double or even triple responses by participants in alternative religions to undermine the solidness of the 0.46% figure. So to be cautious, one might want to reduce this percentage to 0.4% or even 0.3%.

There is, however, at least one more consideration to take into account. Though almost all major alternative religions have an outpost in New Zealand, few were explicitly included on the census. In particular, there are numerous Buddhist groups that appeal primarily if not exclusively to Westerners. If one goes to the New Zealand Buddhist Directory (<http://www.buddhanet.net/nzealand.htm>), one will find groups like Soka Gakkai, Shambhala Center plus a wide variety of Vipassana meditation and Tibetan Buddhist organizations. These groups are usually classified in the alternative religions category in general survey books on New Religions (e.g., Chrystides 1999; Lewis 2001; Ellwood and Partin 1998). Participants in these groups were not distinguished from the other Buddhists constituting the 41,469 Buddhists reported in the 2001 census.

One way of getting a handle on the number of people involved in Western-oriented Buddhist groups (groups usually considered New Religions in the West, despite their lineage) is the ethnic backgrounds of participants. Because the website for the 2001 New Zealand census includes a table correlating ethnicity and religion, this information is readily available. The Ethnic Group and Sex by Religious Affiliation table records that 10,890 New Zealand Buddhists are of European heritage. Assuming that some of these European Buddhists are converts because of marriage and other factors, it is reasonable to infer that at least half – or 5,445 – are involved in Western-oriented Buddhist groups.

There are also Swedenborgian and Unity School of Christianity churches in New Zealand, the members of which were lumped in with the 192,165 generic Christians recorded in the census. Unfortunately, estimating participation in alternative Christian groups cannot be addressed via ethnicity. Additionally, there are followers of Satya Sai Baba, Maharaji, and a wide variety of other South Asian groups who may have been lumped in with the 38,769 Hindus noted in the census. The census reported 4,329 Ethnic Europeans who self-identified as Hindus. Using the same cautious percentage (50%) we applied to European Buddhists, this would mean 2,114 people involved in Western-oriented Hindu groups. Finally, one wonders what happened to members of other groups like the Raelians, Eckankar, Falun Gong, and Theosophy, all of which have a presence in New Zealand. When all of these organizations are considered, raising the estimated participation rate to 0.5% is quite legitimate.

New Zealand also collected less detailed information about religious membership in censuses prior to 2001. This data reflects a interesting pattern of growth:

Table 3

Growth in Alternative Religions from 1999 to 2001 in New Zealand

	1991	1996	2001
Nature and Earth Based Religions	318	1,722	5,862
Spiritualist	3,333	5,100	5,853
New Age Religions	696	1,839	3,210
Satanism	645	909	894
Scientology	207	219	282
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Total	5,196	9,786	16,062

Source: Statistics New Zealand

As can be seen, the overall pattern reflects a tripling of total numbers in a decade. The fastest growing segment is Paganism (“Nature and Earth Based Religions”). Only Satanism fell off between 1996 and 2001. The decline of the latter may be due, in part, to the uninspired leadership that assumed control of the Church of Satan following the death of Anton LaVey in 1997 (in this regard, refer to Lewis 2002).

Australia National Census Data

The Australian census contains information similar to the New Zealand census. One more category for alternative religious groups is provided, and all of the data from 2001 is arranged into a straightforward comparison with the 1996 census:

Table 4

New Religion Statistics from the 1996-2001 Australian Census

Religion	1996 Members	2001 Members
Animism	727	763
Caodaism	964	819
Christian Science	1,494	1666
Druidism	554	697
Eckankar	829	747
Gnostic Christian	559	723
Liberal Catholic Church	596	498
Nature Religions*	1,734	2225
New Churches (Swedenborgian)	504	427
Paganism	4,353	10,632
Pantheism	835	1085
Rastafarianism	1,023	1066
Religious Science	634	417
Satanism	2,091	1798
Scientology	1,488	2032
Spiritualism	8,140	9279
Sukyo Mahikari	668	513
Tenrikyo	46	60
Theosophy	1,423	1627
Wiccan/Witchcraft	1,849	8755
Total	30,501	45,829

* I infer that "Nature Religions" refers to Neopaganism.

The rise from 30,501 members to 45,829 members represents slightly more than a 50% increase in five years. (Religions in the Neopagan categories experienced the most rapid rate of growth – an average 250% increase.) With respect to number of census respondents in 1996 (17,750,000) and 2001(18,767,000) this represents a rise from 0.17% to 0.24%. This rate of participation is considerably less than New Zealand. Unlike New Zealand, the Australian census seems not to have allowed people to respond to more than one item. Like New Zealand, Australia has an abundance of alternative religion groups that “slipped through the cracks” of the above categories because they were recorded as generic Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. Unfortunately, an Australian census table correlating religious membership with ethnicity is unavailable without paying a fee, so I was unable to obtain the same kind of figures for Western participation in Asian Religions as I did for New Zealand. We can say that, because of the many New Religions missed by the census, a 0.3% - 0.4% participation rate for 2001 would be a reasonable but still conservative estimate.

One problem with this estimate is that it contrasts so significantly from the corresponding 0.5% estimate for New Zealand. Is there really such a marked difference in participation rates between these two sister countries? In terms of numbers of people responding to their respective national censuses, there were five times as many Australians as New Zealanders in 2001. Of the comparable religions in the two censuses, only Christian Science had more than five times as many members in Australia than in New Zealand. Australian Mahikari and Tenrikyo members were almost five times as numerous as corresponding New Zealand members. But all of the other groups fell well below the one-to-five relationship. In the case of Rastafarianism, there were actually more total members in New Zealand than in Australia. So it seems there is a genuine difference in participation rates between these two countries.

It could be counter-argued that there are probably more alternative religions in Australia than in New Zealand and thus more Australian participants who missed the census net. And it could be further argued that, being a larger country, there are a greater number of religious “species” in Australia that draw away some of the people who would have joined other groups, thus explaining why the one-to-five ratio does not hold for most of the religions found in both censuses. However, even if a greater variety in religious fauna between the two countries is a factor to consider, it seems highly unlikely that it would be enough to account for the comparatively large difference between the two participation rates.

If we restate the data from “down under” as 0.3% - 0.5%, then we have a statistic comparable to the Barrett and Johnson data for North America. Adding together their New Religions, Spiritism, and Other data, Barrett and Johnson’s participation rate for Australia and New Zealand works out to 0.34%, which is in the same range.

United Kingdom National Census Data

The United Kingdom also conducted a census in 2001. The census recorded a reasonably good spread of different groups. Regretfully, religious participation was not measured in previous censuses. The figures for the England and Wales part of the census are as follows:

Table 5

New Religion Statistics for England and Wales from the 2001 British Census*

Group	Members
Spiritualist	32404
Pagan	30569
Wicca	7227
Rastafarian	4692
Scientology	1781
Druidism	1657
Pantheism	1603
Satanism	1525
Christian Spiritualist Church	1461
New Age	906
Hare Krishna	640
Christian Scientist	578
Celtic Pagan	508
Eckankar	426
Animism	401
Brahma Kumari	331
Heathen**	278
Raja Yoga	261
Unification Church	252
Vodun	123
Occult	99
Asatru	93
Sant Mat	53
Divine Light mission	21
Santeria	21

Total	87,189
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* Source: Census 2001. Crown Copyright 2004. Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the controller of HMSO.

** This is a term of self-reference used by certain Neopagans.

With respect to a population of 52,041,916, a total of 87,189 members represents a participation rate of less than 0.17%. The larger number of categories means that somewhat fewer respondents were absorbed into the statistics for their parent traditions, though these categories are still far from comprehensive. Although a handful of Hindu-related groups are included, Buddhist New Religions are noticeably absent. New Thought groups like Unity and Religious Science are also not represented as separate categories, as well as many other groups that have a presence in Great Britain.

An important factor influencing the outcome of the religion aspect of the census was that someone decided it would be a fine bit of humor to encourage people to write "Jedi Knight" in the religion category. As a consequence, 390,127 people in England and Wales responded that they belonged to the Jedi Knight religion. Although this is quite amusing, I would guess that proportionally more of these self-designated Jedis were involved in some form of alternative spirituality than the general population, though how much more is difficult to determine. Minus the Jedi factor, I estimate that 0.17% would rise to at least 0.2%.

Like the New Zealand census, the UK census provides information on ethnicity and religion. In England and Wales, 0.12% of the 47,520,866 White population is Buddhist and .02% Hindu. Taking these percentages and then dropping the resulting figures by 50% gives 28,512 Western Buddhists and 4,752 Western Hindus. There are also Christian New Religions that have slipped through the census categories. When the minus-the-Jedi consideration is combined with the estimate for the various New Religions found in the Buddhist and Hindu folds, plus a conservative guess for the number of people in Christian New Religions, a cautious estimate would place the participation rate in the UK in the 0.25% - 0.3% range.

Canada National Census Data

Although the religion categories for the 2001 Canadian Census are even less satisfactory than the categories used in the Australian, New Zealand, and British Censuses, they are nonetheless useful for comparative purposes. In a country with a population of 28,000,000, the census recorded 38,000 members of alternative religions, or a participation rate of less than 0.14%.

Table 6

New Religion Statistics from the 2001 Canadian Census

Religion	Number of Members
Gnostic	1,165
New Age	1,525
Paganism	21,085
Rastafarian	1,135
Satanism	850
Scientology	1,525
Spiritualist	3,295
Swedenborg	1,015
Unity/New Thought	4,000
Vineyard Christian Fellowship	2,600
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Total	38,215

Adapted from: Statistics Canada's Internet Site,
<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/highlight/religion>. Extracted April 23, 2004.

Similar to the New Zealand and Australian censuses, Buddhist and Hindu groups regarded as New Religions were not separated for statistical purposes. And unlike New Zealand and Australia, even non-traditional Christian groups like Christian Science were apparently collapsed into Christianity. The addition of the classifications "Gnostic" and "New Age" appear to have been for the purpose of including alternative religious groups that did not fall handily into other categories. The New Age as a more general spiritual influence escapes straightforward efforts at

measurement, as will be discussed below. I think it would be quite reasonable to estimate much higher participation rates for Canada than indicated by these truncated census figures, more in the 0.25% - 0.3% range at least.

Religion Survey Data for the United States

Unfortunately, the U.S. census does not collect religion membership data. However, in 1990, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York conducted a National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI) via randomly dialed phone numbers (113,723 people were surveyed). Eleven years later, in 2001, the same center carried out the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) in the same manner (over 50,000 people responded), though callers probed for more information than the earlier NSRI. Categories were developed post-facto. The results were quite interesting:

Table 7

New Religion Data from NSRI and ARIS

	1990	2001
Scientologist	45,000*	55,000
New Age	20,000	68,000
Eckankar	18,000	26,000
Rastafarian	14,000	11,000
Wicca	8,000	134,000
Druid**		33,000
Santeria**		22,000
Pagan**		140,000
Spiritualist**		116,000
Totals	79,000	583,000

*Numbers have been rounded off to the nearest 1,000. Unlike a census, which attempts to reach the entire population, these figures represent statistical extrapolations.

**The final four categories did not emerge as significant in the 1990 NSRI survey.

Source: B. A. Kosmin and A. Keysar, *Religion in the Marketplace* (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Books, 2004). Adapted table used with permission.

Although it would have been much more useful had the researchers broken down their data into more subcategories, their results are nevertheless striking. In a period of eleven years, the overall participation rate in alternative religions increased sevenfold. Once again, however, we are plagued by the collapsing of important New Religions into their parent traditions. Had the various Christian alternative religions been separately categorized, the results would likely have been much different.

For the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, we can obtain a rough estimate of participation in New Religions by separating ethnic Buddhists and Hindus from Western converts. Although the NSRI did not record ethnicity, the ARIS did. Out of an estimated 766,000 Hindus, 2% were White. Out of an estimated 1,082,000 Buddhists, 28.5% were White. Taking these percentages and then halving the resulting figures gives 7,660 Euro-American Hindus and 154,185 Euro-American Buddhists. Adding these numbers to the 583,000 figure and dividing the sum by a U.S. population estimate of 207,980,000 gives a participation rate of 0.35%

Had all alternative religions – including the Christian, Buddhist and Hindu groups missed by the two surveys – been considered together, the sevenfold growth rate would likely have been less spectacular. Like the Australian and New Zealand census data, the NSRI-ARIS data has been sharply affected by the meteoric growth of Neopaganism (here represented by the Wicca-Druid-Pagan figures) in recent years. Also, if Christian alternative religions had been distinguished so that they could have been included in the final total, the 0.35% participation rate derived from the ARIS data would have been higher. How high this rate would rise if we had more complete data again depends on where one decides to draw the line between what is and what is not an “alternative” religion. If we take a conservative approach, a 0.5% participation rate represents a reasonable estimate. Of course, if we adopted looser criteria for what constitutes a New Religion, much higher estimates would be possible.

Concluding Remarks

Generalizing from the data presented in the prior sections brings us to the conclusion that participation in alternative religions is quite low. In the Anglophone world, the participation rate is 0.3% - 0.5%. And though certain countries might have a lower rate than 0.3%, I would speculate that the participation rate in Western Europe as a whole probably falls into the same range.

The statistical picture of New Religions reflected in this data is that of a small-scale phenomenon involving a fraction of a percent of the population. For religious groups that have formal memberships, this is probably an accurate portrait.

However, informal spiritual trends such as the strand of spirituality referred to as “New Age” often cross taken-for-granted boundaries between religions. For example, in the late nineties, George Gallup and Michael Lindsay found that a surprising number of self-identified born-again Christians in North America held “New-Ageish” beliefs. Out of their sample, 20% believed in reincarnation and 26% believed in astrology. Although these statistics do *not* mean that 20% or more of all Evangelicals are “really” New Agers, they *do* indicate that alternative spirituality has infiltrated society in ways that are missed when the population is measured in terms of mutually exclusive religious categories, and thus slip through the net of surveys and censuses.

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