

7 ■ *Spirituality in South Africa: Christian beliefs*

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Introduction

There is a widespread popular perception that South Africa's peoples are a religious people with a vast majority claiming membership of a particular faith group. Under the apartheid era's white rulers, there was a further perception that almost all of South Africa's religious peoples were Christian and that the Christian faith was all that mattered. This changed slightly in the late apartheid period when the National Party set out to woo the Jewish voter, which required it to give some recognition to the Jewish faith and to stop stereotyping Jews as either communists or anti-National Party capitalists. All other religions (Hindu, Muslim, and Independent African) were regarded as marginal and embraced only by those without votes and at the lower end of the economic totem pole.

What is interesting, however, is that successive surveys of public opinion in South Africa have revealed a certain truth to the stereotype, in that they have shown that the vast majority of the population identify themselves with a Christian church. In the July 2001 survey, 83% indicated membership in a Christian church, the dominant denominations being the Zionist Christian Church (Z.C.C.) (10%), the Methodist Church (9%), other Zionist Christian churches (9%), Roman Catholic Church (8%), Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (8%), Apostolic Faith Mission (8%) and Anglican (6%) denominations. Almost one in ten (9%) indicated that they belonged to non-Christian religions, the largest of these groups being Islam and Hinduism. A further 7% reported not belonging to any religion.

Attendance at religious meetings

Affiliation with a religious denomination does not necessarily correlate, however, with claimed attendance at services or meetings. In the 2000 survey, just under

one in five (18%) adult members of the population said that they attended a religious meeting more than once per week, and a further one-third (32%) said they did so on a weekly basis. In the July 2001 survey, similar trends emerged, with 46% of South Africans indicating that they attended a religious meeting at least once every week. This we categorise as frequent attendance. At the other end of the participation scale, 21% never attended religious services, 3% did so once a year or less and 6% attended between two and four times per year.

Table 7.1 To which religious group do you belong?

Religious group	Per cent
Zionist Christian Church (Z.C.C.)	10,2
Methodist Church	8,5
Other Zionist Christian churches	8,5
Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk	8,3
Roman Catholic Church	7,6
Apostolic Faith Mission (A.F.M./A.G.S.)	7,6
Anglican Church	6,0
Old Apostolic Church	4,2
Other black independent churches	3,8
Lutheran Evangelical Church	3,4
Other Pentecostal or charismatic Christian churches	2,4
Baptist Church	2,0
Assemblies of God	1,6
Other Christian churches	9,5
Hindu	1,5
Islam	1,6
Jewish	0,2
Other religions	5,4
No religion	7,1
Refuse to answer	0,5
Uncertain/Don't know	0,3
Total	100,2

It should be noted that these findings are sharply contradicted by a number of smaller regional studies that have been conducted in South Africa (Vermeulen et al., 2000). The latter have found that no more than 20% of the population attends church regularly. The implication is therefore that in the HSRC's national surveys, far more people claimed to attend church than actually do so and that church attendance is widely perceived to be desirable, even if not put into practice.

Table 7.2 How often do you usually attend a religious meeting or service?

Frequency of attendance	Per cent
More than once per week	15
Once per week	31
2 to 3 times per month	15
Once per month	9
2 to 4 times per year	6
Once per year or less	3
Never	21
Total	100

Public opinion and church attendance

An analysis of the data from the 2000 survey (Rule, 2000) found that more than two out of five (41%) frequent churchgoers (once per week or more), as opposed to 36% of rare or non-churchgoers, felt that the government should be allowed to prevent citizens from expressing opinions that are negative or unpopular. Similarly, the frequent-going group was slightly more inclined to favour government control over the flow of information on 'issues of national importance' than were others. Frequent churchgoers were slightly more in favour than rare or non-churchgoers of the 'right of citizens to form or join any organisation'. More than one-third (38%) of frequent churchgoers agreed with the contention that the government should be allowed to ignore the national constitution if the majority of the population favoured this approach. One-quarter (25%) of the rare/non-churchgoer group concurred. A slightly larger proportion of frequent churchgoers (63%) than rare attendees (53%) felt that elected officials should bear responsibility for government decisions. While these

differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 17,4$; $p = 0,002$), it might have been expected that religiously committed people would be more unanimous in expecting government officials to shoulder responsibility for its decisions.

On the issue of giving preference to 'previously disadvantaged' groups in employment practices, three in five South Africans (61%) were in favour and one-fifth (22%) against. The remaining 17% did not express an opinion. Differences between the various categories of churchgoer were insignificant ($\chi^2 = 1,25$; $p = 0,87$), with marginally more frequent churchgoers than rare or non-churchgoers favouring this form of affirmative action. Given the biblical dictates of generosity and selflessness, it might have been expected that these differences would have been larger. Frequent churchgoers also revealed a stronger tendency (63%) to perceive immigrants as criminals than did rare or non-churchgoers (both 54%). Ironically, there appeared thus to be a lower level of compliance with the biblical injunction to refrain from passing judgement over others amongst frequent churchgoers than amongst others.

This analysis implies that, as far as public opinion on several socio-political issues is concerned, there is not a vast difference between Christians who claimed to attend church services or meetings at least once a week and those who said that they attended less frequently or not at all. In instances where differences were statistically significant, it was frequently the more regular churchgoers that displayed somewhat less compassionate views than did the less frequent or non-churchgoers. An implication of this is that if the views and opinions of frequent churchgoers do not differ significantly from those of rare or non-churchgoers, church attendance may not be putting the goals of Christianity into practice. If attendance at church meetings and services were not overtly propagating the gospel message and its associated beneficial and constructive values in society, then it would not be distinguishable from non-attendance, or even from attendance of other civil society organisational meetings.

Views about Christian principles

As a means of further interrogating the mindsets of Christians in South Africa, the survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements. The statements either contradicted or confirmed fundamental biblical principles about which Christians might be expected to hold orthodox views. The five statements were:

1. Praying a lot is a waste of time
2. Sex before marriage is permissible for Christians
3. Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems
4. There is no life after we die
5. A Christian is someone who is born again spiritually

1. *Prayer*

The first statement, 'Praying a lot is a waste of time', contradicts the biblical injunction that believers should 'pray continually' (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and casts doubt on the affirmation that 'God is near us whenever we pray to him' (Deuteronomy 4:7). With a significant majority of South Africans claiming Christian affiliation, a high proportion of disagreement with the statement would be expected. This was the case, with 45% indicating that they strongly disagreed that praying a lot is a waste of time and a further 38% disagreeing. The small remainder were either in strong agreement (6%) or agreement (5%), were neutral (4%), or could not choose (2%).

2. *Extra-marital sex*

The second statement is that 'Sex before marriage is permissible for Christians'. Christian tradition dictates that sexual relations should only take place between marriage partners. Numerous warnings against sexual immorality occur throughout the Bible (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10–20; Matthew 5:27–30; Matthew 15:19; 1 Corinthians 6:13; Ephesians 5:3). Christians would thus be expected to disagree with the statement. However, less than half of South African adults expressed disagreement (23% strong disagreement, 26% agreement). A further 14% were neutral and 7% could not choose. Almost one in three agreed that sex before marriage was permissible for Christians (19% agreed, 11% agreed strongly).

3. *Jesus as the solution*

The explicit contention that 'Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems' might be expected to elicit agreement amongst practising Christians. The bible identifies the fundamental flaw in human society as being its sinful nature. This is succinctly encapsulated in the interpretation made by celebrated Christian apologist C.S. Lewis (1990:19), who made two pertinent points in his *Mere Christianity*:

First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.

The biblical solution to this fundamental problem is thus that Jesus, the perfect and sinless human being, was punished by death in place of humanity in order to absolve them from their sinfulness. The extent to which South Africans understand this basic Christian doctrine is illustrated by their response to the statement. Almost half (49%) strongly agreed that 'Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems' and a further one-third (33%) agreed. In contrast, 5% disagreed and 4% disagreed strongly. Only 7% are neutral and 3% could not choose.

4. Life after death

The fourth statement, 'There is no life after death', would be expected to generate disagreement amongst Christians. The prospect of 'eternal life' for Christians is mentioned frequently (Ecclesiastes 12:5; Luke 16:9; Luke 18:30; John 3:16; John 5:24; 1 Peter 1:3-5). The implication is that after death in a material human sense, there is life of a different form that will last forever. However, less than half (46%) disagreed with this statement (22% disagreed strongly; 24% disagreed). Almost one-fourth were undecided (15% neutral; 11% can't choose) and more than 25% agreed that there is no life after death (16% agreed; 12% strongly agreed).

5. Spiritual re-births

The New Testament is explicit about the necessity for spiritual rebirth (John 3:1-8). The statement that 'A Christian is someone who is born again spiritually' would thus be expected to elicit widespread agreement amongst the predominantly Christian population of South Africa. Almost two-thirds did agree (30% agreed strongly; 34% agreed) and 17% disagreed (10% disagreed; 7% disagreed strongly). A relatively large proportion were either neutral (10%) or could not choose (9%).

Christian belief

Using responses to these five statements, a rudimentary index of Christian belief (CBI) was computed for each respondent. For each of statements 1, 2 and 4, if the respondent disagreed or strongly disagreed, a score of 1 was computed.

Similarly, for statements 3 and 5, a response of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in each case was credited as 1 point to the respondent. Each respondent thus ended up with a score between 0 and 5, depending on his or her responses to the five statements and to the question about attendance at religious meetings.

The distribution of scores amongst the 83% that identified themselves explicitly as Christians was such that only 16% received the maximum score of 5. Only one out of six Christians thus held orthodox views about all five issues included in the statements. This proportion increased to almost half if allowance was made for one unorthodox view and four orthodox views. The mean CBI was 3,3. Almost half (49%) scored above an index value of three (Table 7.3).

Table 7.3 Christian Belief Index (CBI)

CBI	% of Christians (83%)	% of non-Christians (17%)	% of total population
0	3	12	5
1	5	14	6
2	15	26	17
3	28	27	28
4	33	15	30
5	16	6	14
Total	100	100	100
Mean	3,3	2,3	3,1

When the CBI of all Christian respondents was cross-tabulated against the frequency with which a respondent claimed to attend a religious meeting, no distinctive pattern emerged. Only one-fifth (20%) of those who claimed to attend religious meetings more than once per week scored a maximum 5 on the CBI. Ironically, 9% of those who said that they never attend meetings also scored 5. At the opposite extreme, 3% of the most regular attendees (more than once per week) scored 1 or less on the CBI, while 11% of those who never attend meetings scored similar results. Across all frequencies of attendance, approximately three-fifths of the Christian population of South Africa scored either 3 or 4 on the CBI (Table 7.4).

Thus, the relationship between a respondent's CBI and his/her claimed frequency of attendance emerged as fairly weak (Pearson's correlation $r = -0,182$; $p < 0,001$). Those who claimed frequent attendance at religious meetings or services did not have significantly stronger levels of belief or commitment to the five principles of Christianity included in the CBI.

Table 7.4 CBI by religious meeting or service attendance

Attendance	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
>Once p w	1	2	11	28	38	20	100
Once p w	4	4	15	26	32	19	100
2-3 p m	2	3	15	27	38	15	100
Once p m	6	7	13	32	29	13	100
2-4 p y	5	11	16	32	25	11	100
Once p y or less	7	12	17	24	26	14	100
Never	4	7	25	29	26	9	100

A simplification of the above table into four categories, using beliefs and church attendance, yields a typology of four.

Table 7.5 Typology of Christians in South Africa

	Frequent church attendance	Infrequent or non-church attendance	
Adherence to Christian beliefs	A = 31% Practising	B = 13% Lapsed	44%
Unorthodox Christian Beliefs	C = 29% Intentional	D = 27% Nominal	56%
	60%	40%	

However, further cross-tabulation of this Christian typology against a range of other questions included in the July 2001 public opinion survey indicates extremely limited differences between the groups, excepting active membership of a church or religious organisation.

Table 7.6 Attitudes and behaviour of Christians in South Africa

	Practising	Lapsed	Intentional	Nominal	All
Active member of a political party	11	13	15	14	13
Active member of a trade union	7	9	5	5	6
Active member of a church	66	42	58	32	53
Active member of a women's organisation	11	9	10	4	9
Active member of a civic organisation	3	4	2	2	3
Spent time talking with depressed person in last year	76	67	78	71	74
Adult children have duty to look after elderly parents	86	84	91	80	86
OK to develop friendships with people just so they can be of use to you	44	46	47	44	45
Most SA whites have racist attitudes	61	60	65	62	62
Church has contributed to reducing racism	67	56	61	53	61
Race relations improved since 1994	43	43	42	42	43
Are you generally happy?	74	72	72	67	72
People like me have no say in government	48	50	46	44	47
Will vote ANC in next election	45	52	49	45	47
Will vote DA in next election	13	8	6	8	9
Will vote IFP in next election	5	3	5	2	4
Will not vote in next election	8	9	10	9	9

It emerges again, that the only thing that distinguishes practising Christians from others is the frequency of their church attendance.

Conclusion

Given the low correlation between the CBI and regular attendance at church, the question arises as to why churchgoers go to church at all. What is it that they are seeking in their either frequent or infrequent visits to their 'House of God'? Is it ritual, a habit, or custom passed down over the generations? Is it guilt? Is it that what they are seeking is a community of friends, a network of relations in an increasingly atomised world? Unfortunately, these questions were not asked, so no answers can be given. But perhaps this is an area for future enquiry.

References

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