

“Te haahi o oku matua”

The church of my elders

Te Aroha Rountree

The basis of this paper is my doctoral thesis topic “Hokianga Whakapau Karakia” Māori interaction with Christianity 1814 -1900. It is an historical study of Māori interaction with Christianity as recorded through nineteenth century Māori language writings. The brief presentation explores a unique Māori perspective of Christianity, by examining a selection of Māori language writings that were used to express and communicate a distinctly Māori experience. The selected writings are key exemplar of Māori understandings and experiences of Christian religious teachings and ways of living.

A waiata

The first example is a song featured in Margaret Orbell’s ‘Waiata: Maori Songs in History’¹ This song is indicative of the early experiences of Māori and the Missionaries and is an example of how Māori had begun to incorporate Christianity into their own values and belief systems. The song is entitled ‘E Hohepa, e tangi’ (You’re crying, Joseph), and illustrates the common practice among Māori converts, of taking-on baptismal or Christian names. The practice of adopting Christian names highlights the importance Māori placed on aspects of Christian belief and practice. Names, in Māori oral tradition were often a reflection of tribal histories and therefore were highly valued. These new Christian names also came to be valued by Māori and quite often reflected an individual’s life and experiences and of course like Māori names were passed on to subsequent generations.

The song was described by Mitcalfe as a ‘waiata oriori’ similar to a lullaby. The genre of ‘waiata oriori’ was used by Māori as a method of recording and transferring tribal histories and whakapapa (genealogy) to young or unborn children. The fact that references to Christianity have been incorporated into a ‘waiata oriori’ is an early indication of the importance and value Māori had begun to place on Christian faith. The song was also described as a ‘himene’ or hymn, which is also significant and shows Māori people’s readiness to explore Christian hymnody.

In the song the phrase ‘Me aha taua i te po inoi, i te po kauwhau?’ used in a Christian context to mean; ‘What must we do on the night of prayers, the night of preaching?’, highlights variations in the meanings attributed to Māori words such as ‘inoi’ and ‘kauwhau’, words that are even today synonymous with Christian prayer or sermon. The phrase ‘te wai Horana’ (the waters of Jordan), is thought to be a reference to ‘John the Baptist’ and the baptismal proceedings that were popular among newly converted Māori. This would convey a broader, more comprehensive knowledge of the Bible than is often afforded to Māori of this period in time. The reference to ‘te whare i a Tana’, (the house of Turner), is perhaps, more than a comment on the mission house of Nathaniel Turner, but rather the increasing numbers of mission stations in Māori communities. Although Turner’s mission station at Whangaroa had been abandoned in 1827, the idea of missionary settlement amongst Māori was still very much on the minds of the people heading into the 1830s and 40s.

There are many references in this song that resonate with missionary sentiments of the time, while also appealing to Māori. In particular the line in the song that reads; ‘kia

murua te kino, kia wehea te hara' (so that evil can be forgiven and your sins removed), this line refers to the Christian concepts of forgiveness and redemption. The Christian belief that in seeking forgiveness for your sins, you may be granted redemption must have seemed to be an attractive proposition to many Māori who had previously participated in some quite devastating acts of warfare. The latter half of the song reads: 'Kia tohutohungia ki te rata pukapuka, te upoko tuatahi, te upoko i a Kenehi, te rongopai o Matiu . . .' (and be taught the letters in the book, the first chapter, the chapter of Genesis, and the Gospel of Mathew). The references to the written word and the specific text of the book of Genesis, as well as the gospel of Matthew, would suggest that the composer had a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Bible. By the early 1830s, many Māori had received instruction in the missions and with access to Māori language translations of the Bible or extracts of the Bible Māori were beginning to develop a greater understanding and appreciation for the missions and for the messages of Christian faith. This song like all forms of Māori oral tradition was written with purpose and direction, urging young Joseph to seek out the house of Turner, the mission, that he might learn the word of God, in the book of Genesis and the gospel of Mathew, and that he may be enlightened.

A letter

In a letter published in 1850, Wiremu Watipu wrote, like many Māori writers of the period, with the Māori people as his target audience. He wrote: "Pray that we may be strengthened while living in the midst of so much evil; pray that we may be enlightened in the midst of this darkness; pray that our foolish hearts may be divinely taught; pray also that we may stand fast, that our feet may not slide, and that true faith may be increased within us."² The image of Māori living in the 'midst of evil and darkness' and the seeking out of 'true faith', were likely influenced by missionary rhetoric of the time. But there is also a certain measure of 'authentic belief' that can be taken from such writings. Further he comments: "One word more, which is, that you will give your whole hearts to prayer to God in our behalf, that he may continue to give us his Holy Spirit, in order that we may possess light when we go among our friends who will not listen to the truth; . . . Pray that the influence of the Gospel may increase then we will all rejoice together."³ Many publications including the Māori language newspapers were publishing letters from Māori expressing similar attitudes, often in areas that had had little or no exposure to missionaries. This also highlights the significant role of 'monita', Māori monitors or native catechists who travelled to remote areas to spread the Gospel, often pre-empting the church missionaries arrival.

Newspapers

The decade of the 1850s and 60s witnessed a rise of Māori healers and prophetic movements that were often characterised by an amalgamation of Christian and Māori values and beliefs. The 1850s also welcomed the new and improved Māori translations of the bible, which became readily available to most Māori in the north, and likely contributed to the increase in competency levels of literate Māori. By the late 1850s, Māori were writing letters and commentaries that would later be published in newspapers such as *Te Karere Maori*. This was a government newspaper, produced monthly with a direct purpose to create unity and in many ways uniformity between Māori and Pākehā by instructing Māori in appropriate social and moral conduct.

A letter signed by the 'Rangatira o Ngapuhi i Hokianga' (Chiefs of Ngapuhi in Hokianga), was published in the February 1858 issue of *Te Karere Maori*.⁴ The letter

was sent from Mangungu, dated January 13 and signed by a number of chiefly leaders who represented more than two hundred others. It was a letter welcoming the Governor to the Hokianga. The letter expresses strong feelings of Māori and Pākehā unity and Māori allegiance to God and Queen: “. . . na nga ture o te Atua o te Kuini i tuhonohono ai nga iwi kia kotahi,” (the laws of God, of the Queen, assemble the tribal groups in unity). Further reference is made to ‘te ture a te Atua me nga ture o [te] Kuini’, (the laws of God and the laws of Queen). They refer to the laws of God and Queen as the ‘patu hou’ (new weapons) to seek and suppress any evil that may still exist amongst the people of Hokianga, ‘kia whiwhi ai ki te patu hou hei pehi i te kino’, (seek the new weapons to suppress the evil). Although there was a lot of influence from the editors of the newspapers, letters like these give us a glimpse of what many Māori of the time were experiencing and the social, political and religious changes of that period.

During the 1870s & 80s there was a considerable increase in Māori letter writing and perhaps as much as 50-60% of them made some reference to Christianity or Christian morality. The letters often appeared in the place of an ‘ohaki’ (bequest) or even an obituary, Christian prayers and words of encouragement to those left behind to remain close to the missionaries and to the government, to hold fast to the teachings of the Gospel and to maintain their faith in God. The following extract appeared in a letter written by Hone Mohi Tawhai of Waima, Hokianga where he recalls the final words of Papahurihia, founder of the Papahurihia prophetic movement, and a Christian convert in later life.⁵ “Ko ana kupu enei: ‘Karakia ki te Atua nui o te rangi. Kia kaha ki te whakapono, whakatuara atu ki te Atua. Hei konei, e hoa ma. Kia mau ki te ture, kia piri tonu ki te Kawanatanga. E ko, korero atu ki to matua, ki a Hone Mohi Tawhai, kia kaha ia ki te whakapono ki te Atua, hei matua mona i muri i a maua ko tona matua, ko Mohi Tawhai. Me whakatuara ia ki te Atua, ki te ture o te Kuini”, (These were his words: ‘Pray to the great God in Heaven. Be strong in the faith, and give support to God. Goodbye, my friends. Hold to the law, stay close to the government. Girl, tell your father, Hone Mohi Tawhai, he must be strong in the belief of God as a father for him after me and his father, Mohi Tawhai. He must give support to God, to the law of the Queen). Papahurihia, who had previously opposed the intrusion of Christianity into his tribal area, shifted his focus and came to accept Christianity in his later years, expressing a desire for his people to remain under the auspices of the Governor and his laws and to be uplifted in their Christian faith.

Māori had incorporated Christianity into their existing values and beliefs, and they had begun to pass those same values and beliefs onto their children. Mohi Tawhai, of Hokianga and his family are a good example of Christianity becoming a part of Māori tradition. Mohi Tawhai was a Christian convert and one of the first to establish a church in Waima. His son, Hone Mohi Tawhai, was also converted to Christianity and became an avid letter writer. Finally his grandson, Kereama Rangatira Tawhai, also a Christian, undertook ministry training in Auckland for a brief time before his sudden death in 1885.

The next letter was written by Hone Mohi Tawhai, published in the newspaper *Te Korimako*, in January 1886. This is a letter of appreciation from Hone Mohi Tawhai to the many contributors who expressed their condolences and words of support after the death of his son, Kereama Rangatira Tawhai. He acknowledges the encouraging letters that appeared in a previous issue of the newspaper and gives a brief description of the funeral ceremony and attendants. He also talks about the comfort he finds in the words of scripture and how he and his family have turned to their Christian faith for solace. “E whakamarama ana i te pouri o taku ngakau,hei rama o kupu ki toku

ngakau. E taku hoa, tenei ahau kua marama, ehara te pouri ki nga mea o tenei ao, i te huarahi ki te Atua, ...me tapae atu ki te aroaro o to tatou Ariki, o Ihu Karaiti, ...i te nuinga o te honore me te kororia o tona Matua, te Kaihanga o te rangi, o te whenua, o te moana, me te pouri, me nga mea katoa e ngahue ana i runga. I whai kupu marama iho ano ta tatou tamaiti ki ahau, ki tona iwi katoa ano hoki”, (I have thought carefully about your words, and I understood at once, and it lightened the sadness of my heart, ...your words are as a light for my heart. My friend, this I understand, I do not think of the sadness of this world, but of the pathway to God, ...[he is] placed in the presence of our Lord, Jesus Christ, ...with the greatest honour and glory of his Father, the Creator of heaven, of earth, of the sea, and sadness, and all things that appear above. Our child sought words of understanding, words from me, and also from all his people).⁶ We see from this example and many others of a similar tone the depth of meaning and presence that the Christian faith had for Māori. Māori undoubtedly regarded Christianity as a significant part of their lives.

In his own words Kereama Tawhai gives his last wishes for his people, reiterating his commitment and faith and appealing to those left behind to remain vigilant in their faith and to be assured that he goes to be with God leaving behind this world: “...ka mutu, ka ki mai: ‘E te iwi, kia piri tonu ki a te Karaiti, ko ahau kei a ia tonu inaianei, ko koutou kia mau tonu ki te whakaponu. E haere ana ahau ki te ringa matau o toku Kaiwhakaora. Ko koutou ka waiho iho nei e au i tenei ao kino, heoi ano, he mahi ma koutou i muri nei he awahi tonu ki a Ihu Karaiti, hei konei, kua pai!” (...that done, he said: ‘People stay close to Christ, I will be with him now and ever, you are to hold to the faith. I am going to the right hand of my Saviour. I leave you in this evil world, however, the work for you hereafter is to continue to embrace Jesus Christ, farewell, it is settled!).⁷

In the next example we see that the use of metaphor common in Māori oratory, has been substituted with scriptural quotation. This is just one example of a multitude of writings that feature scripture indicating a change in the way Māori choose to express their thoughts and also possibly a more in-depth understanding of scripture. “Kei a Pita tuatahi, te 1 o nga Upoko, te 24, te 25 nga rarangi: Rite tonu hoki ki te tarutaru nga kikokiko katoa, te kororia katoa ano hoki o te tangata, ano he puawai tarutaru. E maroke te tarutaru, e ngahoro tona puawai, ko te kupu ano tenei e kauwhautia atu nei ki a koutou” (First according to Peter, chapter 1, the 24th, and the 25th lines: All the flesh is also like the grass, like all the glory of the man, like a flower about to bloom. The grass is dry, his flower shall fall, this is the very word that has been preached to you).⁸

The final letter is from Hone Mohi Tawhai a Wesleyan convert, in which he expresses a strong disassociation with the practice of cannibalism and makes a clear distinction between the varied practices of the Catholic Church and those of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the Wesleyan Missionary Society. Tawhai, like many Māori, understood and commented on the denominational division between Protestant and Catholic churches often perpetuated by the missionary leaders of the time. He expresses his disdain towards an anonymous writer who has made generalisations about the practice of cannibalism in Hokianga and he attempts to clarify the situation with his own explanation.⁹

Tawhai asserts that it is in fact the Catholic converts in the Waihou area of Hokianga who continue to practice cannibalism. Further he sets the responsibility firmly upon the leaders of the Catholic Mission, who he believes have been negligent in discouraging such behaviour. He concludes that the Catholic priests, through their neglect must condone the acts of cannibalism and therefore they are responsible for its

continuation. “I saw the previous anonymous notice in Te Korimako, in the month of June, concerning the cannibals of Waihou, Hokianga. Listen, Church of England, Wesleyan Church, Catholic Church, and Baptist Church. Don’t say that this cannibalism is amongst all the people of Hokianga. No. It is the Catholic Church that practices cannibalism in Hokianga. . . . There is no going out to suppress the actions of their sheep [followers]. From this we know their Catholic Church supports this act of cannibalism, of the sheep [followers] of the Catholic Church. . . . Cease from spreading this bad reputation out over Nga Puhi and all of Hokianga”

This shows the distinct character of Māori Christianity that had evolved by the late 1800’s in Hokianga, for many Māori it was no longer simply superficial acceptance of Christianity for the purposes of trade and wealth, but genuine commitment to and understanding of Christianity.

Contemporary Māori perspectives of Christianity

In the 20th century, the Māori renaissance of the 1970s and 80s led in large part by young educated Māori saw the revival of Māori language and culture. Māori began to look at issues of colonisation and challenged the record of New Zealand history. Māori began to tell their own stories, their histories from their own experiences and those of their people who had gone before. There also emerged several Māori commentaries that began to explore issues of faith and in particular, Māori perspectives of Christianity. One of the most significant pieces of work was a paper by Ruawai Rakena which looked directly at the issue of the Māori response to the Gospel, exploring among other things, the limitations for Māori in the structural or governance processes of the Methodist church.¹⁰ This discussion paper, most likely contributed to the development of the current governance structure of the Methodist church that recognises a ‘bi-cultural’ commitment. Selwyn Muru’s, *The Gospel according to Tane*,¹¹ and an article featured in Tu Tangata entitled; *Incompatibility between Maoritanga and Christianity*,¹² both addressed questions about reconciling Māori spiritual beliefs and Christianity. In the early 21st century we have begun to see a renewed interest in indigenous research and indigenous perspectives of Christianity and for New Zealand, a localised Māori perspective. Māori historians and researchers have begun to look beyond prophetic movements and conceptualising Māori Christianity, and are seeking an unprecedented Māori voice. Māori participation in, engagement with and expression of Christian faith has been diverse. Māori experiences of Christianity have varied from region to region and from generation to generation.

This paper ‘Te Hāhi o ōku mātua’ (The Church of my Elders) is indicative of the nature of Māori Christianity both past, present and future. The church of my elders refers to Christianity as an inheritance. For many Māori, Christianity is passed down through the generations, and like most other values and traditions it is nurtured and developed from one generation to the next.

Nō reira e ngā iwi whanui, kia tau te rangimarie.

Endnotes

¹ Orbell, Margaret *Waiata: Maori Songs in History*, Reed, Auckland. p28.

² *The Church Nissionary Intelligencer*. Vol. 1, 1850. p 271.

³ *Ibid*, p.271.

⁴ *Te Karere Maori*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1858, p. 17.

⁵ *Te Waka Maori o Niu Tirani*, No. 24, 1875, pp. 295-297.

⁶ *Te Korimako*, No 48, 1886. p 9

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ *Te Waka Maori o Niu Tirani*, No. 24, 1875, pp. 295-297.

⁹ *Te Korimako*, No 67, 1887, p 9.

¹⁰ Rakena, Ruawai D, *The Maori Response to the Gospel*. Wesley historical Society NZ. Proceedings, Vol 25 Nos. 1-4, 1971.

¹¹ Muru, Selwyn, *The Gospel According to Tane*, Auckland, 1983.

¹² Broughton, Ruka, *Incompatibility between Maoritanga and Christianity* Tu Tangata 27 1985/86. p 5.