

BYRON RANGIWAI

## Mixed-up Theology

The Māori prophets of the nineteenth century developed syncretistic theologies as responses to colonisation and land loss. In so doing, these prophets provided models for us to follow with regard to maintaining aspects of our culture and traditions alongside introduced ideas. These strategies are useful because they demonstrate indigenous innovation in the face of devastation. They are examples of Māori development in action. The prophets showed us that ideas and knowledge, even if they seem to conflict, can co-exist beneficially.

In my experience, tangihanga are typically the events where syncretistic theologies can be seen developing organically. With regard to the pōwhiri process, ngā atua Māori dominate; and during the evening prayers and funeral service, Christianity dominates. Without truth-defining structures that exclude, multiple theologies may coexist in the one space. This is an innovation that the Māori prophets created and perfected.

At many marae, multiple theologies engage with each other, whether these are different theological and denominational views from the same religion - such as the many views held by numerous Christian groups; or seemingly diametrically opposed theologies - such as those from te ao tawhito, which may potentially collide with those from Christianity.

This poem describes the syncretistic theology that I have grown up with. It is a theology that is “mixed-up” in that various theological figures converge in ways that have the potential to be confrontational, but which, from an indigenous perspective, can be perfectly harmonious.

Surrounded by karakia  
And tears of joy  
We come into the world  
Surrounded by karakia  
And tears of sorrow  
We exit the world

Buried in the bosom  
Of Papatūānuku  
Swaddled lovingly  
In Hinenuitepō's kākahu  
Crowned with stars  
Plucked from Ranginui's canopy

Flowing, ballooning robes  
Frolick and flap about  
Darting in between prayers  
Himene and karakia flow  
From one minita to the next  
Preaching about Jesus  
The radical, love-obsessed Jew

Jesus said  
In my father's house  
Are many mansions  
I'll have one of those, bro  
A flash as house would go nicely  
With my starry crown and cloak

Jesus can be my father  
And Hinenuitepō, my mother  
Papatūānuku and Ranginui  
My Nanny and Koro  
We can all fit inside  
One of those mansions  
There's lots of room  
For everyone...  
And their beliefs