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## The Atuatanga model: A methodology for researching Māori theology

This article will discuss the development of the Atuatanga model and its relevance and application to the exploration, conceptualisation and researching of Māori theology. The word *atua* refers to an ancestor with continuing influence; or a god, demon, supernatural being, deity, ghost, strange being, or an object of superstitious regard (Moorfield, 2011). While the word *atua* is commonly translated as 'god', Moorfield (2011) argues that this is a misconception of the original meaning. Tate (2012) maintains that the missionaries took the word *atua* and used it to describe the Christian God, capitalising the 'a' in 'Atua' to signify the superiority of the "...the only true God..." (John 17:3).

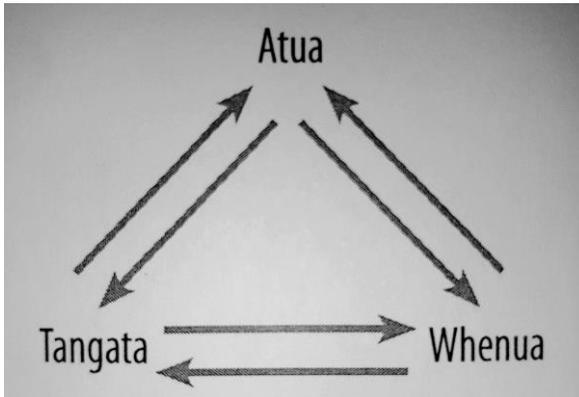
Adding 'tanga' - a suffix added to nouns to designate the quality of the base noun (Moorfield, 2011) - to the end of the word *atua*, creates the term *Atuatanga*. Melbourne (2011) states:

The word has two parts; the first is 'atua', a word to describe spiritual beings (more commonly called gods) which were credited with supernormal powers that could be exercised in helping or opposing people, in the mundane affairs of this life. The second part, 'tanga', is the suffix which speaks about the culture or dealing with everything that has to do with spiritual beings, or 'ngā *atua* Māori and *Te Atua o te Paipera* (God of the Bible), and how Māori modified and adapted their understandings to these in their lives (p. 20).

I define Atuatanga quite simply as “...all things atua” (Rangiwai, 2018c, p. 179). In the context of this work and with regard to my theological thinking generally, Atuatanga pertains to Māori spirituality whether one is referring to atua, Atua, or both. The term Atuatanga will be capitalised throughout, so too the word Atua, to denote the importance of Atua - plural or singular (ngā Atua/te Atua), Māori or Christian - to Māori.

In developing the Atuatanga Model, my theological thinking has been shaped by the theology expressed by Pā Henare Tate (2012) in his Atua, tangata, whenua model.<sup>1</sup> He argues that our Māori relationships with Atua, tangata and whenua are “dynamically related” (p. 38) and in fact define who we are. Tate (2012) opines: “If one enhances one’s relationship with *Atua*, also enhanced will be one’s relationship with *tangata* and *whenua*” (p. 38) and vice versa. He also contends that the same is true if one begins with whenua or tangata as a starting point.

**Figure 1: Atua, tangata, whenua model**



(Tate, 2012, p. 38)

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<sup>1</sup> Tate (2012) does not refer to this model as a model as such. Rather, the model is part of a sub-section entitled *Atua, tangata and whenua* (pp. 38-40).

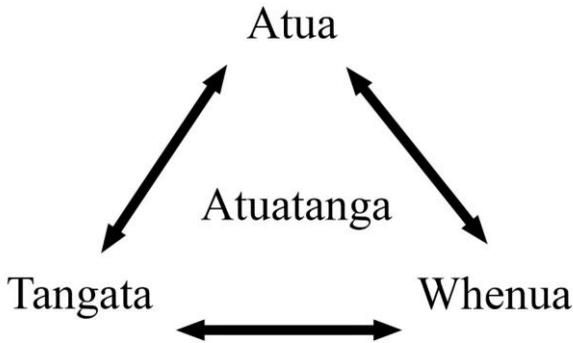
Like the early missionaries, Tate (2012) uses a/A to distinguish between ‘atua’ and ‘Atua’. He argues that the missionaries were exposed to Māori creation narratives which described the origins of the universe and the place of departmental atua within their various realms over which they possessed dominion. However, he argues that atua were not supreme beings. He states: “The relationship of these spheres of creation to one another appears to be grounded only in the unity of the Creator who brought them into being. The *atua* relate back to their creator and therefore to one another” (Tate, 2012, p. 39). Tate (2012) uses the term Atua to name God of the Bible in his work. The word *tangata* refers to human beings, or to a person. While the term *whenua* refers to land. For Tate (2012), “[*u*]henua provides sustenance for *tangata* and all other living creatures. It gives *tangata* a sense of identity and belonging” (p. 39).

The Atuatanga model draws architecturally and theologically on that of Tate (2012). However, there are significant differences. In the Atuatanga model, there is no distinction drawn between ‘atua’ and ‘Atua’. The term Atuatanga, here, refers to both. The concepts of *tangata* and *whenua* are the same as those expressed by Tate (2012), with the exception of an additional meaning to the word *whenua*, which engenders an important theological consideration. Tate (2012) comments on the importance of land for the provision of sustenance for all life on the earth. However, “[*u*]henua is a term that means both land and human placenta; the double meaning of this word points to the significance of Māori connections to land” (Rangiwai, 2018f, p. 10). This extra layer of meaning connects Māori to the land genealogically, physically and spiritually as “[*u*]henua is a cultural concept and cultural reality that concomitantly names land and placenta, and addresses the links between Papa-tū-ā-nuku and Māori” (Rangiwai, 2015, p. 224; see Rangiwai, 2018f, p. 14). Furthermore:

For Māori, the concept of *whenua* as land and the concept of *whenua* as placenta are inseparable and

indubitably convey the fundamental connections of Māori to the environment. The Māori world view reflects the *whakapapa* relationships of humans and all living things to the primordial parents, Papa-tū-ā-nuku and Rangi-nui, and to each other; everything is connected (Rangiwai, 2018e, p. 73).

**Figure 2: Atuatanga model<sup>2</sup>**



Atuatanga is the central theological concept in this model. The dynamic triangulation of the aspects of this model expresses a Māori theological reality based on the interdependent relationships between Atua, tangata and whenua. Atuatanga has a number of context-dependant definitions spanning across a range of Māori disciplines. This work, however, will highlight only theological definitions of the term from Melbourne (2011) and Hollis (2013).

From a theological point of view Melbourne (2011) describes Atuatanga as: pre-European theology; Māori spirituality; theology from a Māori perspective; and the study of God from

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge Dr Benita Simati-Kumar for making this model at my request.

a Māori, and particularly, Māori Anglican, perspective - citing the fact that Te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa, the Māori arm of the Anglican Church, have discussed and used the term Atuatanga to describe Māori theology in their ministry training since the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup> Melbourne (2011) argues that one school of thought names Atuatanga as the system of knowledge surrounding the Io tradition - the creator and ruler of all things. This tradition is found in certain iwi and in some parts of the Pacific including Hawai'i, the Society Islands, and the Cook Islands (Moorfield, 2011), but is a topic of debate as some argue that Io is a post-contact response which mirrors the 'supremacy' of the Judeo-Christian God.

Melbourne (2011) opines that many Māori have, since the arrival of Christianity, omitted the beliefs in ngā Atua, believing that these are opposed to those of Christianity. He contends that Atuatanga might be understood as an attempt by some Māori to understand the God of the Bible through Māori understandings, and at the same time, an attempt by others to bring together and reconcile the beliefs of traditional Māori with those of Christianity. Others, he argues, have revived some pre-Christian traditions with regard to ngā Atua. Melbourne (2011) maintains that the position of Te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa, with regard to ministry training, has been to "...interweave traditional concepts along with Christian thinking" (p. 27).

Hollis (2013) argues that the term Atuatanga requires careful consideration; in fact, he wrote an entire doctoral thesis around Atuatanga and its potential to hold together the Christian and Māori theological worldviews. He expounds that Atuatanga may refer to the domain over which te Atua or ngā Atua express authority. The term may represent, he claims, the characteristics and the study of ngā Atua or te Atua. He states:

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<sup>3</sup> Both Hollis (2013) and Melbourne (2011) comment on the fact that Te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa included Atuatanga as a field of study in their ministry training in the mid-90s, which was the result of a failed attempt, with regard to New Zealand Qualifications Framework accreditation, to use the word 'theology' in a ministry qualification.

“*Atuatanga* has been equated to the English word theology and some *te reo Māori* experts considered it to be the closest word in *te reo Māori* to the Greek derivative of [the word] theology” (Hollis, 2013, p. x).

An in-depth literature review around the term *Atuatanga* is beyond the scope of this article but Hollis’ (2013) doctoral thesis entitled, *Te Atuatanga: Holding Te Karaitianatanga and Te Māoritanga together going forward*, provides references to a range of different materials that mention or discuss the term, and which show that it is not a new word.

The *Atuatanga* model is a methodological framework for the exploration, conceptualisation and researching of Māori theology. I have used this model as a means to think about, research, and write about Māori theology. The *Atuatanga* model was the lens through which I conceptualised, researched and interpreted my theological thinking and which allowed me to access the language necessary to write the following autoethnographic pieces.

### ***Syncretism in Māori theology***

Theology is God talk  
A human attempt to  
Theorise the Divine

Theology ‘from here’ and  
Theology ‘from elsewhere’ (Darragh, 2003)  
Theology is shaped by context (Tate, 2012)

Through indigenous eyes  
Theology can be a platform  
From which to rediscover, reclaim...

...reconcile and redefine our spirituality  
In a neo-colonial context  
As indigenous Māori Christians

Marsden and Ruatara preached

Jesus' blood mixed with whenua  
And a new faith grew in the people

Māori prophets, as responses  
To land lost, syncretised  
Theologies, Māori and Christian

Innovative frameworks of faith  
Developed in the face of devastation  
Instilled in our people, a sense of hope

The plea of Māori messiahs all  
Was to hold on to the land  
To look courageously to the future

Syncretism: a phenomenon where  
Indigenisation and Christianisation  
Occur simultaneously (Jørgensen, 2013)

One where the power of those who control  
Religion is disturbed and disrupted (Goosen, 2000)  
Our prophets unsettled Pākehā power!

A deep-seated uncertainty of syncretism  
Exists throughout Christian history (Jørgensen, 2013)  
And yet the Church has always...

...been infused with local culture (Vilaça & Wright, 2009)  
Gods, spirits, rituals and ceremonies  
Melt into one another

Akin to Christ's Mass and Solstice  
Our traditions merged, like wearing black  
Ringing bells, and blessing headstones

We embraced Christianity  
Through the templates  
Of our own knowledge (Cooper, 2017)

We 'did' Christianity our way  
And we never fully abandoned

Our former spirituality (Lewis, Willing & Mullan, 1995)

atua or Atua?  
The Christians took our word  
And offered it on the altar of the new God

A capitalised 'A' to signify  
That 'the one true God' is superior  
And a small 'a' to denote the 'lesser' (Tate, 2012).

"Māori indigenous theology is  
Māori faith seeking Māori understanding.  
It is theology developed by Māori for Māori" (Tate, 2012,  
p. 21)

"Māori theology is  
Ranginui e tū nei,  
Papatūānuku e takoto nei"  
(W. Te Haara, personal communication)

Māori theology determines  
The parameters of our spiritual reality  
Where Hinenuitepō and Jesus embrace

Māori theology is atuatanga  
Atuatanga is Māori spirituality  
Atuatanga is all things atua (Rangiwai, 2018c, pp. 177-  
180).

### ***Mixed-up theology***

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 (Rangiwai, 2018b, pp. 175-176).

***“God is...”:A personal theology based on stories from  
my grandmother***

God is the pulse of the universe  
God is the sunlight piercing the kawakawa leaves  
God is the first breath of a pēpi born on a dirt floor  
God is the belly of a kererū heavy with miro berries  
God is the crackling of wood in the kāuta  
God is rēwena bread - te taro o te ora - cooked in the  
embers  
God is mīti tahu reconstituted with pūhā  
God is collecting rongoā in the bush to heal the whānau  
God is white bread with jam dipped in cream

God is a chipped enamel mug burning my bottom lip  
 God is the 'fragrance' of kānga wai bubbling in the pot  
 God is the eel squirming in the hīnaki  
 God is a full puku after the hākari  
 God is the taniwha lurking in the river  
 God is the potato we touch when exiting the urupā  
 God is the branch the tohunga uses to sprinkle us with  
 water  
 God is the marae bell calling us to prayer  
 God is the tokotoko pointing to Papatūānuku and  
 Ranginui  
 God is ngā atua Māori in the environment around us  
 God is the mauri that animates life  
 God is the wai that negates tapu  
 God is Koro's grave in Casino  
 God is the log floating up-stream  
 God is the faded poppy wreath in the wharenui  
 God is the sorrow of a broken heart  
 God is the strains of wailing and tangi  
 God is the warps and wefts of a whāriki  
 God is the medals sent home after the war  
 God is the green lizard scurrying under a rock  
 God is the aroha of a Nanny for her mokopuna (Rangiwai,  
 2018a, pp. 171-172)

***Tangihanga***

You lie in state  
 In the wharemate  
 At Patuheuheu marae  
 Adorned with a taonga  
 That I gave to you  
 A pounamu Hei Tiki  
 Kahurangi grade – fine, light  
 And without blemish

Your passing cuts deep  
 Into my fragile, broken heart  
 The tears sting my cheeks  
 The hūpē dries on my black t-shirt  
 Like the trails of a dozen snails

Glistening in the summer sun

The grief drains me, vampirically  
Like a squirming black, leach  
Pulsating and feasting  
On the arteries of my aroha  
Its sharp mouthpiece gnawing  
Intensely and purposefully

Images of you unwell and  
Dying, haunt my thoughts  
I recall your suffering  
Each time I close my eyes  
Hospital scenes and last moments  
Projected on my eyelids  
In High Definition realness

When you made your descent  
Beneath Papatūānuku's skin  
I watched from afar and wept  
Hinenuitepō's embrace  
Nor Jesus' promise of heaven  
Did little to comfort me  
Your chrome nameplate  
And myriad plastic flowers  
Now mark your resting place

My whānau are my healers  
The rongoā for my pain  
Their presence and love  
This begins the healing  
As does the incessant crying  
Behind closed doors  
When I am alone (Rangiwai, 2018d, pp. 173-174).

The Atuatanga model is a methodological framework for researching and writing about Māori theology. The triangulation and dynamic interaction of Atua, tangata and whenua, as the building blocks of Māori theology, are clearly visible in the ethnographic works above. Atuatanga - all things Atua - is

weaved throughout each of the pieces, and is punctuated by the interface of Hinenuitepō, Ranginui, Papatūānuku, and Jesus. The Atuatanga model is one that may become a methodology for further scholarly research around the topic of Māori theology, and it is hoped that it may be useful to others in the field.

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