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# Atuatanga and syncretism: A view of Māori theology

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## **Introduction**

From a young age, I was always obsessed with religion. I was born into a whakapapa of syncretistic theology: a mixture of traditional Māori beliefs and rituals blended seamlessly with various Christian denominations and Ringatū - a syncretistic religion created by the nineteenth-century Māori prophet Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki. My great-grandfather, Hāpurona Maki Nātana, who was married to Pare Koekoeā Rikiriki, was of Patuheuheu and Ngāti Manawa descent. His mother was Rangimaea Fitzgerald who was born of a Ngāti Manawa mother, and an Irish father. She was a devout Catholic. My grandmother, Rēpora Marion Brown (nee Maki), who contributed significantly to the development of my theology, told me that her grandmother Rangimaewa was a 'staunch Catholic' who fasted often, refrained from eating meat on Fridays, and frequently prayed the Rosary.

In the late 1980s when I was perhaps 8 or 9 years old, I became very interested in Catholicism. I attended Sacred Heart Catholic church in Murupara. Going to church was a case of doing as the 'Romans' do. I crossed myself with holy water upon entering the church and genuflected with both sincerity, and

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high drama, my eyes fixated on the seemingly life-sized, 3D, blood-drenched crucifix.

Nanny Pare was Ringatū, and so was her daughter, my grandmother. Koro Hāpurona and Nanny Pare had many, many children. They were baptised alternatively: the first Ringatū, the second Catholic, and so on. However, their last child was baptised Presbyterian. Throughout my growing-up years, I attended many Ringatū services with my grandmother and other members of my whānau.

In the early 1990s, I attended the Elim church in Murupara. During my time with Elim, I attended a Christian camp. At this camp, we prayed in tongues for the fall of Saddam Hussein. We raised our hands and voices in prayer and praise to the Lord. But I had no idea how to pray in tongues, but I was told that it is a unique language that only God could understand. To me, it sounded like gibberish. I decided that my particular style of glossolalia would be to repeat “peanut butter” over and over again; that seemed to do the trick!

In 1996, when I was 16, I converted to Mormonism. I had been seduced by a sense of absolute belonging coupled with fun activities and the potential of one day serving the Church as a missionary. In 2002 I was assigned by the Church to serve a two-year mission. I had doors slammed in my face. I was verbally abused, threatened with violence, and chased by vicious dogs. I rode bicycles and walked the streets, come rain, hail or storm, door knocking and preaching the Mormon gospel. In 2003 I was excommunicated from the Church, thus ending a six-year term with the Mormons.

My maternal grandfather was Ngāti Porou from Te Araroa. He, like most of the iwi, was raised Anglican. He was not a church-going man, but he did believe in God. Some years following my excommunication from the Mormon Church, I decided to follow the religion of my grandfather's Ngāti Porou people, Mihingare or Anglican. Archbishop Don Tamihere of Ngāti Porou maintains: "...religion - which I'm more inclined to refer to as whakapono - is an integral part of Ngāti Porou life.

It's been blended into our tikanga to such an extent that it's really hard to tell where Christianity begins and tikanga Māori ends" (Husband, 2018, n.p.).

Christianity is shaped by the contexts into which it is planted. This is certainly true of Christianity in a Māori context. Here, I will creatively explore the notions of Māori theology, Atuatanga, and syncretism.

### **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

### **Prophets**

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**

Syncretism, or religious mixing, is a word that has had negative connotations in some theological circles. Some theologians have viewed the mixing of religions as a form of contamination; and conversely, by sociologists and anthropologists, as a naturally occurring phenomenon when cultures clash, collide or combine. I argue, however, that syncretism is not only normal but that it is a form of self-determination, exemplified by the Māori prophets of the nineteenth century. Syncretism is present on our marae where karakia tawhito and Christianity often dance together; and particularly at tangihanga, where Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death, and Jesus, have been known to escort loved ones into the great mystery jointly.

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

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)

### **Māori Theology**

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

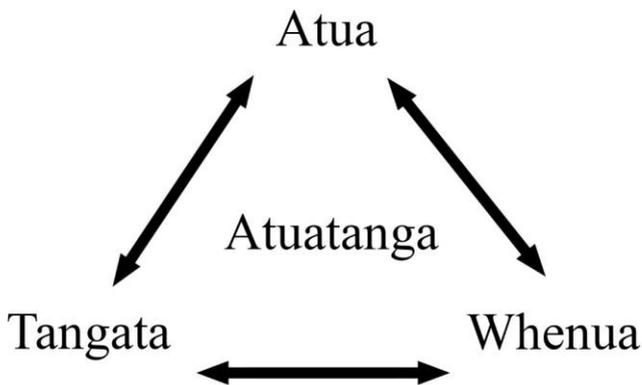
“Māori theology is  
Ranginui e tū nei,  
Papatūānuku e takoto nei” (W. Te Haara, personal  
communication)

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

**Atuatanga**

Atuatanga is at the core of Māori spiritual life. I define Atuatanga as “all things Atua”, referring to both ngā Atua Māori – the traditional deified Māori ancestors with continuing influence; and Te Atua – the introduced and adopted God of Judeo-Christianity. It is a term that points to a spiritual realm that is “beyond” and concealed from view. Atuatanga is a concept that allows one to oscillate between or seamlessly amalgamate the spiritual traditions that have shaped Māori spirituality. Atuatanga is concomitantly at the centre of our traditional incantations and our Māori Christian prayers, where one’s intention, and one’s performance of a service to whānau, hapū, and iwi, is of more importance than the vehicle of delivery.

**Figure 1: Atuatanga model**

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. He argues that our Māori relationships with Atua, tangata and whenua are “dynamically related” (p. 38) and in fact define who we are. Pā

Henare was a Catholic priest, and his theology reflected that. Atua, in his model, refers to the biblical God. However, the Atuatanga model does not distinguish between our deified ancestors and the Judeo-Christian deity. 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.

A-tua: that which is beyond...  
Out of focus, like a ghostly shadow  
An enigmatic shape in the corner of my eye  
Behind a veil of dense mist

Atua: the root of Atuatanga  
Ancestors, gods, demons, supernatural beings  
Deities, ghosts, strange entities  
Relics of superstitious regard (Moorfield, 2011)

Incantations uttered by tohunga  
Stir up energies, powers surge  
Rippling through the matrix of  
Atua, tangata and whenua

We adopted gospel faith  
Baptised and named it Te Rongopai  
Washed anew in the springs of our minds  
Fed with Te Kūmara o te Ora<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual beings with supernormal powers (Melbourne, 2011)  
Ngā Atua Māori: personifications of the Divine in creation  
Out of Māori and Christian synthesis, comes Atuatanga

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<sup>1</sup> Te Kūmara o te Ora was, according to Don Tamihere, Bishop of Te Tairāwhiti (personal communication, 16 March, 2017), a substitute used by the late Venerable Dr Hone Kaa to replace Te Taro o te Ora, the Bread of Life, in Māori liturgies.

Māori theology shaped by Māori spirituality (McKay, 2005)

Coveting and converting the Christian message

Māori immersed the faith in wairua

Tailoring scriptures and liturgies

To satiate our spiritual appetites (Wiremu Kaa, cited in McKay, 2005)

### **Conclusion**

Wherever Christianity has established itself, it has changed and been changed by the local context. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Christianity has been shaped by Māori. At the same time, through contact, adaption, and conversion, Māori have been changed by Christianity. In embracing the introduced God, some have abandoned the old Gods. Some have syncretistically merged both Māori and Christian theologies. While others have restored many of the practices of our pre-contact religion. According to Professor Sir Mason Durie (1994):

A [Māori] spiritual dimension encompasses religious beliefs and practices but is not synonymous with regular churchgoing or strong adherence to a particular denomination. Belief in God is one reflection of wairua, but it is also evident in relationships with the environment (p. 70).

Indeed, spirituality is commonly thought to be the most critical aspect of Māori wellbeing because, if the wairua is not taken care of, a person is disposed to illness and misfortune (Durie, 1994). If it is the case that wairua and spirituality are critical to Māori wellbeing, further research around Māori theology, Atuatanga, and syncretism is both exciting (at least for me!) and timely.

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