

## Chapter 3 Te Harinui: Civilising the Māori with school and church

Ani Mikaere

1. Not on a snowy night  
By star or candlelight  
Nor by an angel band  
There came to our dear land ...  
Te Harinui  
Te Harinui  
Te Harinui  
Glad tidings of great joy.
2. But on a summer day  
Within a quiet bay  
The Māori people heard  
The great and glorious word ...
3. The people gathered round  
Upon the grassy ground  
And heard the preacher say  
I bring to you this day ...
4. Now in this blessed land  
United heart and hand  
We praise the glorious birth  
And sing to all the earth ...

Described as “New Zealand’s best-loved iconic Christmas carol”,<sup>1</sup> Te Harinui was penned by Willow Macky in 1957. It commemorates the arrival of Samuel Marsden to the Bay of Islands, where, on 25 December 1814, he gave what is said to have been the first sermon delivered in Aotearoa, preaching from Luke 2:10: “Behold! I bring you glad tidings of great joy”. Marsden later wrote, “When the service was over, we could not but feel the strongest persuasion that the time was at hand when the Glory of the Lord would be revealed to these poor benighted heathens” (Elder, 1932, pp. 93–94).

During the late 1970s the Anglican boarding school that I attended considered this an appropriate song to be performed at its end-of-year functions. No doubt the fact that the school bore the name of the preacher whose actions we were singing about added to the sense of occasion. Needless to say, pupils were never told about Marsden’s nickname in Australian circles, “the flogging parson” (he earned the reputation among the convicts of being a particularly severe magistrate); nor were we taught the Ngā Puhi waiata “He Waiata mō te Mātenga”, which commemorated Marsden’s first sermon with the now well-rehearsed witticism that while Ngā Puhi looked up, Marsden looked down—a cynical reference to the Pākehā obsession with obtaining land (Te Reo Rangatira Trust, 1998, p. 26).

As a quietly rebellious teenager I balked at the suggestion that my tūpuna had been uplifted by “the great and glorious word”, and regarded with disbelief the idea that Māori and Pākehā had been united in common worship ever since that fateful day. Needless to say, the ear-grating mispronunciation of the only two Māori words in the song (three, if you include the word “Māori”) merely served to exacerbate my irritation. (I should note that the school roll was overwhelmingly Pākehā and that te reo Māori was not included in the school’s curriculum offerings.) I had little understanding, at age 16, of why I disliked the song so intensely or why I found so galling the incessant obligation to bow our heads in prayer to the ultimate white male authority figure. But I instinctively mistrusted the messages being conveyed and deeply resented having to conform to the school requirement of participating in these activities.

Despite the passage of many years, the experience of being forced to sing this song has remained with me. I have often wondered how I

could possibly have failed to voice my concerns about it at the time. I would have struggled to articulate my position, but how could that excuse my silence/complicity? The fact that challenging each and every expression of racism that I encountered while at that school would have been a pretty tall order (and the knowledge that I did frequently confront staff and students) does little to allay my sense of guilt.

Aside from being credited with the introduction of Christianity to Aotearoa, Marsden was also responsible for the establishment of the first mission school in 1816, thereby signalling the start of a lengthy missionary campaign to ‘civilise’ Māori through a zealous combination of schooling and church. While the first school, based at Rangihoua and headed by Thomas Kendall, was not particularly successful, by the 1830s Māori enthusiasm for literacy had translated into significant growth within the mission schools. Keith Sorrenson describes the Māori demand for the printed word as “insatiable”, noting that by 1845 approximately half of all adult Māori had acquired a degree of literacy (Sorrenson, 1981, p. 168).

The conflicting goals of missionaries and Māori led to inevitable tensions. Motivated principally by a desire to convert Māori to Christianity, the missionaries limited their instruction to Christian texts that had been translated into Māori. While the language was Māori, the values being conveyed were distinctly European. Particularly significant was the corrosive influence of missionary beliefs about the inferiority of Māori philosophies and practices (Simon, 1998).

For their part, Māori parents saw no reason to limit their children’s education to Christian texts or to *te reo Māori*. On the contrary, they were anxious for their children to acquire European knowledge and fluency in English so that they would be better equipped to deal with the threats being posed by a rapidly increasing Pākehā population and its obvious hunger for land. It is important to note, too, that the parents saw the acquisition of such abilities as complementing Māori language and knowledge rather than replacing it (Simon, 1998).

When Governor Grey extended state subsidies to the mission schools in 1847, he attached the condition that instruction should be in English, but it is clear that he was more interested in assimilation

than in equipping Māori to better resist the expansion of Pākehā control. He also made industrial training compulsory, a move that caused considerable dissatisfaction among Māori parents, who were rightly suspicious of a policy that seemed designed to turn their children into servants (Simon, 1998). At about the same time as the state began to subsidise the mission schools, several church boarding schools were also established. These provided secondary education for those pupils deemed more promising and were aimed at removing them from “the Māori environment” of the village day schools (Sorrenson, 1981, p. 171). They included St Stephen’s in Parnell (established in 1846) and Te Aute (established in 1854).

During the land wars of the 1860s Māori enthusiasm for Pākehā education plummeted, leading to the collapse of many of the mission schools (Simon, 1998; Sorrenson, 1981). In their place a national system of village primary schools was established. The Native Schools endured for over a century, from 1867 to 1969. However, it was not until 1941 that the first Native District High School was established to meet the needs (as judged by the Department of Education) of Māori secondary school students. Until that time, those who could not afford to attend the denominational schools took their chances at state schools or simply stopped attending school altogether.

For a lengthy period, then, aside from those who attended the denominational schools, all Māori students received a secular education. It should be noted, however, that by this time schools were no longer required as tools for conversion. Sorrenson notes that by the early 1840s most Māori had become, at the very least, “nominal Christians”, adhering more strictly to Christian obligations (such as observing the Sabbath) than their Pākehā neighbours and frequently assembling in large gatherings for worship (Sorrenson, 1981, p. 171). So pervasive was the influence of Christianity that, over time, Christian principles became heavily intertwined with tikanga. A contemporary example of this phenomenon is the surprisingly common practice of opening a pōwhiri with a Christian karakia, after which the whaikōrero is allowed to begin.

During the 1980s Māori rebelled against the assimilatory thrust of the state education system, setting up kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori and wharekura. The Education Act 1989 eventually caught up

with Māori demands, providing for kura kaupapa Māori (section 155) and also for kura-ā-iwi (as special character schools under section 156). As state schools, kura kaupapa and kura-ā-iwi are obliged to offer a secular education at primary level. This does not mean a complete ban on all forms of religious observance or instruction, but there are conditions that must be met. While stating that teaching must be secular during the hours that a school is open for instruction (section 77), the Education Act 1964 also allows a school to close for up to one hour a week for religious instruction or religious observance (section 78). During such times, children must be free to opt out of these activities (section 79). Boards of trustees may choose to include religious instruction at secondary school level (section 72) but the obligation to comply with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 means that any such activity must be offered in a non-discriminatory way, with students free to opt out if they wish.

These provisions suggest that Christian religious observance should play a minimal role, particularly at primary school level, within kura kaupapa and kura-ā-iwi. They would also indicate that at secondary level students should be made aware of their ability to absent themselves from any religious observance or instruction. However, as a parent with some 25 years' experience of children attending kura kaupapa, kura-ā-iwi or belonging to whānau units within Pākehā secondary schools, it is clear to me that Christianity masquerading as tikanga has pervaded these spaces to an alarming degree.

In all of these environments Christian prayer formed part of their everyday routines, opening and closing all gatherings and events. Not only were my children in attendance during such rituals, but they were regularly expected to participate in the recitation of lengthy prayers and the singing of hymns. All of them performed in school kapa haka groups, whose brackets typically began with a suitably Christian song as the choral item. My daughter was even corrected by her teacher when she suggested that their karakia should be addressing “ngā atua” (the gods) rather than “Te Atua” (God).

I'm ashamed to say (more guilt—an inevitable corollary, it would seem, of my every entanglement with Christianity) that I never challenged the privileged position that Christian ritual appeared to occupy within these various 'Māori' educational spaces. The most that I could

manage was to reassure my daughter that I agreed completely with her analysis of what Māori karakia should be about. Showing extraordinary maturity for someone still in primary school, she appreciated that the kaumātua who had corrected her was genuine in his belief and, out of respect and affection for him, she had determined that the best approach was to hold to her personal view but to refrain from upsetting him by arguing the point.

Why didn't I question the prominence of Christianity within these Māori educational environments? In retrospect I think that my expectations of the education on offer for my children had been heavily influenced by the constant, grinding racism that had characterised my own journey through the education system during the 1960s and 1970s. If I'm honest, I was simply grateful that my children were able to attend primary schools where being Māori was the norm: where te reo Māori was spoken; where they would not have to cringe every time a person in authority butchered the pronunciation of their names; where they would be cushioned, for a few years at least, from the full force of having to deal with multiple expressions of racism on a daily basis. The fact that they might have to play along with the odd bit of Christian observance seemed a small enough price to pay.

Moreover, my older children started at primary school early in the 1990s, a time when kaupapa Māori options were still very much in their infancy. It was a struggle to gain support from Māori parents or from the state. In such circumstances, mounting a challenge against the credibility of the tikanga that was being practised within kura would have risked creating divisions in an environment where unity was crucial. As a strong advocate of kaupapa Māori education, it was almost inconceivable to consider raising a voice in protest against the uncritical way in which Christian ritual was being inflicted upon our children in the name of tikanga.

Unfortunately, it is still extremely difficult to raise such issues. Given the unyielding determination of the missionaries to destroy and supplant our 'heathen' practices with their own moral and religious code, the extent to which Māori society as a whole has succumbed to Christian teachings over time is probably not surprising. Moreover, in view of the constant need to defend any ground that we may have managed to win back from the assimilatory apparatus of the state, it

is understandable that we should have become fiercely protective of the tikanga that we practise within kura. We have become highly sensitised to criticism, regardless of where it might come from: two centuries of being told that you are worthless will do that to a people. Understanding all of this, however, does nothing to detract from the perfect irony of finding Christianity, a force that is inherently destructive of tikanga, now flourishing within the kaupapa Māori spaces that we have fought so hard to create.

Something that has changed since my children began their journey through the compulsory education sector is a revival of interest in karakia Māori: it has become increasingly common to hear karakia Māori used as part of the daily routines within kaupapa Māori educational spheres. While this renewal of enthusiasm is encouraging, caution is still called for. I fear that many of the assumptions underpinning Christianity have become so deeply ingrained in our thinking that we are at risk of reinventing karakia Māori in a way that simply reinforces some of the most harmful aspects of Christian thought.

The main tension, as I see it, stems from the fundamental clash between, on the one hand, a theory of existence that is centred on whakapapa and, on the other hand, the dictates of monotheism. Reliance on whakapapa as a central organising concept means conceiving of the whole of creation as an intricate system of relationships. These relationships must constantly be negotiated, nurtured and developed to meet changing circumstances. Whakapapa is dynamic, flexible, complex and non-hierarchical. Monotheism, on the other hand, is rigidly hierarchical and compartmentalised. It is dogmatic, asserting one truth and permitting no other. It normalises the concepts of dominance and subservience, ranking the whole of creation in relation to the supreme power of the One God, who sits in divine isolation, demanding obedience from his subjects and punishing those who err.

In seeking examples of the contemporary practice of karakia Māori having become contaminated by Christian perceptions of religion, it is hard to go past the Io cult. *The Lore of the Whare Wananga* (Smith, 1913) has been subjected to over a century of rigorous critique: from Percy Smith's own contemporaries, such as Bishop Herbert Williams (Sorrenson, 1979); throughout the 20th century from scholars such as

Te Rangi Hīroa (Hīroa, 1952) and Keith Sorrenson (Sorrenson, 1979); and into the current century from Hirini Moko Mead (Mead, 2003) and Ross Calman (Calman, 2004). Despite this formidable array of doubters, the notion of a Māori religious code that apes Christianity in so many respects has proven to be remarkably tenacious. With its insistence on the existence of a supreme male god who created the world by force of his willpower, with its obsessive categorisation and ranking of all ‘lesser’ gods and other entities, with its rigidly tiered priesthood, and with its unbridled misogyny, the Io cult is fundamentally at odds with the whakapapa theoretical framework that our tūpuna devised in order to make sense of their existence. That it is so often accepted uncritically as authentically Māori is as profoundly illogical as it is disturbing.

This is just one example of the way in which colonised mutations of karakia Māori are sometimes perpetrated within kura. There are other practices that are equally dubious; for example, the ludicrous assumption that recitation of karakia is a peculiarly male activity. For those of us for whom decolonisation of the way we understand and acknowledge our place in creation is a priority, practices such as these are no less appalling than the unthinking adherence to Christian ritual that has pervaded kaupapa Māori educational environments during the past 25 years.

This decade marks two centuries of Christian influence in Aotearoa, and we are likely to hear the name of Samuel Marsden repeatedly during this period. It is interesting to ponder what he thought he was achieving when he delivered his Christmas Day sermon to a group of people who had no idea what he was talking about, a fact of which he was well aware (Elder, 1932). We know that the sight of the Union Jack flying above the congregation greatly pleased him: he later noted that he considered it “the signal for the dawn of civilization, liberty, and religion in that dark and benighted land” (Elder, 1932, p. 93). It is also fascinating to note his assessment of Māori as “apparently prepared for receiving the knowledge of Christianity more than any Savage natives I have seen” (Orange, 2004, p. 9). In reaching this conclusion, it is likely that he was comparing us with the indigenous peoples he had encountered in Australia. The task of ‘civilising’ them he considered far more problematic, on account of the fact that “they had no wants, they lived free and independent” (Marsden, 1826, p. 68).



As these sentiments reveal, the missionaries regarded conversion to Christianity as essential to the successful assimilation of indigenous peoples, who were being targeted for colonisation. During the past 30 years, Māori have been resolute in pushing back against the assimilatory tide of the colonial enterprise, particularly in the field of education. It is curious, to say the least, that even as we have fought to reaffirm our tino rangatiratanga across numerous spheres of activity, the inherently and irredeemably colonising influence of Christianity has remained largely unchallenged. Within Māori educational environments—as elsewhere—the time for jettisoning Christian contaminations of karakia Māori, along with Christianity itself, as part of the journey to reclaim our freedom and independence is long overdue.

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 According to [sounz.org.nz/works/show/13893](http://sounz.org.nz/works/show/13893).
- 2 See, eg, the Hope Project, launched by a coalition of Christian churches, which opens its website with the statement: “In December 2014 New Zealand celebrated the bicentenary of the Christian gospel arriving in New Zealand and the beginning of a hope-filled bi-cultural partnership with Māori”. Samuel Marsden is referred to regularly in the materials provided: [hopeproject.co.nz](http://hopeproject.co.nz)