

# A REFLECTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MĀRAMATANGA MOVEMENT AND THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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## Introduction

Karen Sinclair is a competent anthropologist, whose field work involved her with the people of the Māramatanga over three decades. The fact that she grew to love and admire them only increases the likelihood that she has understood them well and recorded their story accurately. My own summary is based substantially on her work *The People of the Māramatanga: Prophetic Histories*, (2002).

However, Sinclair offers no theological critique of what she describes. That was not her anthropologist's task. As a pastor, however, and as bishop of the diocese in which the Māramatanga movement is mainly located, I cannot so easily exempt myself from reflecting theologically and pastorally on the anthropologist's findings – not over against anyone, but as part of my own love for the same people.

## PART I: WHAT IS THE MĀRAMATANGA?

### The Social and Religious Context

We can only understand the Māramatanga if we understand what was happening to the Māori people and how they were reacting to it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What the new settlers from Europe called colonisation, Māori experienced as conquest, in spite of the 1840 Treaty in which Māori ceded to the British Crown the right to govern their country, in exchange for the protection of their sovereignty over lands, lakes, forests and seashores.<sup>1</sup> But now their lands were being taken from them, their customs ignored, and their cultural values violated. They were becoming sidelined in their own country. We know about their armed resistance, which effectively increased their experience of being conquered. We also know of the pacifism of Te Whiti and Rua, who gave them a way of carrying their defeat with dignity.

But there was another form of resistance which we have known much less about, because we were not meant to know. This form of resistance involved re-interpreting the events happening around them, in such a way as to diminish their sense of being conquered, and support a sense of being still in charge of their own destiny. This re-interpretation of events is what lies at the core of the Māori prophetic movements:

Through the nineteenth century, prophetic religious movements became an effective Māori response to their losses of land and autonomy.... For Maori, the prophets and their teachings represented continuity with their past and insulation from the intrusion of the interlopers (page 1).

Christianity had an ambiguous role in colonisation, and, as will be seen, has an ambiguous role in Māori resistance to it. The all-powerful God of the Christian bible was welcome, but the missionaries themselves were perceived as betraying Māori hopes:

Whatever Christianity did for the missionaries and the white settlers, it clearly did not have the same salutary effect on Māori. Once Māori began to suffer serious defeats, they had no choice but to redefine their relationship with the all-powerful Deity of the mission bible. The challenge was to be had in winning him over to the Māori side in their struggle against pakeha. This required redefining themselves as separate from the missionaries and Christian beliefs while continuing to retain faith in their own past (page 21).

A forceful expression of this “redefining” of themselves came in the teaching of the prophet Te Ua Haumēne of Taranaki:

The angel Gabriel inspired Te Ua with a solution for the difficulties besetting Māori... Gabriel revealed a new religion – Pai Mārire, ‘good and gentle’ – to replace the teachings of the missionaries, especially those that granted favour to Pakeha. Pai Mārire expressed its anti-mission sentiment by changing the day of the Sabbath, concentrating on Jehovah rather than Jesus, and depicting a future in which Māori priests would supplant Pakeha clergy. Te Ua’s followers called themselves Tiu (Jews), identifying with the exiles of the Old Testament and distancing themselves from the New Testament and the missionaries. The reversal effected by this religion was crucial: there would be no more Pakeha, yet Māori would have appropriated their accomplishments. In the exile of the Pakeha and in the supremacy of Māori, justice would have been achieved in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Once Aotearoa belonged again to Māori, the angels would instruct them in the language and sciences of the white man (page 22).

Te Ua’s appeal was limited to the West Coast of the North Island. On the East Coast, Te Kooti was developing similar lines of thought:

For Te Kooti, exile to the Chathams was parallel to an exile in Egypt, while his alliance with Te Ua was viewed as the beginning of a return to Canaan. Captivity and exile were to become central themes of the ideology of Ringatu. Te Kooti commemorated both Exodus 12 and his own escape from exile by establishing the Passover as the most distinctive festival of the Ringatu calendar. But the prophetic leader also revived elements of the old, pre-missionary Māori religion; religious officiates were called tohunga; sorcery once more served as an explanation for ill-fortune; and faith-healing became one of the most important Ringatu sacramental acts. These invocations validated past rituals and assured a receptive audience that the ancestral sources of power and authority were still effective (pages 23-24).

These movements were a significant part of the social and religious environment in which the Māramatanga would emerge:

The Māramatanga is a successor to this prophetic tradition. From its establishment in the early twentieth century by the prophet Hori Enoka, who took the name Mareikura, the Māramatanga’s ideology and ritual have sustained Māori... In the words of the movement’s waiata and whaikorero, and in the words of the descendants of the original founders.... we see an alternative narrative in which history remains firmly under Māori control (page 2).

### **The role of Mere Rikiriki**

Elements of these earlier prophetic movements came down into the Māramatanga movement, although there is not a straight continuity between them.

The history of the Māramatanga begins in the early years of the twentieth century, when a relatively obscure prophetess, Mere Rikiriki, moved away from the models invoked by her nineteenth century predecessors. Her work, with its ritual and ideological implications, transformed the Māori prophetic tradition, shifting the paradigm from the Old to the New Testament. She is the origin, both physical and spiritual of the Māramatanga (page 36).

However, Rikiriki was not advocating the adoption of Christianity at the expense of older Māori beliefs:

She held firmly to notions of causality consistent with the Māori, not the Pakeha, world-view; by delving into the past she sought answers and assistance for the present. In this act, Mere Rikiriki provided for a duality in Māori existence (page 43).

And, for Rikiriki, the scriptures brought by the missionaries *augmented* older Maori sources of revelation, it did not replace them. This will be important for our understanding and evaluation of the Māramatanga.

Rikiriki had influenced both her nephew, T W Ratana, and Hori Enoka Mareikura. But whereas the Ratana movement focused on combining the religious and political spheres, Mareikura mainly followed Rikiriki's charism as a faith-healer. (In more recent times, the movement's leaders have become involved in the work of government agencies on behalf of Māori).

Mareikura himself was an Anglican, but his wife, Te Huinga, whose family's land at Ohakune became the movement's central marae, Maungarongo, was Catholic, and the movement's followers to this day are committed Catholics.

Mareikura himself must have been a remarkable man: he

established himself in the Waimarino as a gifted healer, attracting individuals who were sick, betrayed, or down on their luck. He gave freely and generously, whatever the cost, and however little he had himself, providing the unfortunate with food, clothing, and shelter, and offering them spiritual guidance and succour. He watched over everyone's health and well-being, making sure that when necessary, sick children would have the required money for medical care. He also was concerned with his sacred undertaking of tapae (page 51). (To tapae was to hand over to the Christian God evils from the past in order to render them powerless to cause new harm. It is similar to what we would call exorcism.)

### **The role of Lena**

Another key component in the development of the Māramatanga was the role of Lena. She had been adopted by Mareikura's daughter Anaera and her husband Ruka, in the customary Māori way of adoption. But to the grief of all, she died at age 14. However, she returned, in the way that Māori believe spirits of the dead can return to communicate with the living.

Few Māori, no matter what variant of Christianity they seemed to embrace, had abandoned the notion that wairua could and did wander after death. Wairua were known to come back, to give advice or assistance when things were not going well (page 14).

To this day, the Māramatanga sees the messages of Lena as a form of revelation that runs alongside the revelation brought by the missionaries.

Lena became Te Karere o te Aroha (the messenger of love), a guide to her family. For the Mareikura family, a new era began. They had known prophets, they had one in their midst, and the elders amongst them had followed others. Now, through Lena, they had a discernable route to salvation. For the next 65 years, her family would possess knowledge and guidance given to them by Te Karere, and in time by other wairua. Through messages, pao (epigrams), patere (chants), waiata and dreams, Te Karere o te Aroha has continued to contact and guide the family (page 57).

At the heart of her messages is the reassurance that Māori ancestral knowledge is still valid. The Holy Trinity had shared knowledge of salvation with the Māori people even before the coming of the missionaries (cf pages 61-63).

### **Later generations**

Mareikura's son, Pauro, was a devout Catholic, whom I had met at Ohakune in the early days of this diocese, and later at Hastings where he finished his days. He was the one mainly responsible for handing on the Mareikura tradition and wisdom, after Mareikura himself, and with the same dispositions as Mareikura.

The next generation included Matiu, Hoana (Joan Akapita), and Raana (Bidly). These have all played leading roles, at ra's and pilgrimages, and handing on through discussion, chants, dreams and visions, the Mareikura heritage.

Paying tribute to the teaching role of Hoana, Karen Sinclair describes a spiritual instruction period at the marae: Hoana had explained to the assembled children and teenagers the history of the flag flying over the marae and its importance to Mere Rikiriki who had originally given it. Hoana referred

to the work of the nineteenth century prophets as 'Mosaic Law'.... She told the gathered young people about the nature of mauri and how the guardian of the marae was a source of protection, but at the same time must not be offended. The gifts of their ancestors had been handed down through a chain of prophets and prophetic movements, through Pai Mārire, Ringatu, Te Whiti, Mere Rikiriki, Ratana, and Mareikura. Although all connected to the Mareikura family, these young people were led into the larger tradition of Māori religious thinking. They were also told explicitly that the missionaries did not give the Māori all the teachings of Christianity; they were known already (pages 149-150).

Teachings and claims like this are what we need to evaluate. Are they consistent with Catholic faith?

## **PART II – THEOLOGICAL/PASTORAL EVALUATION**

### **1. “Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:19)**

What then are the aspects of Christianity that Maori *already knew* without having to be told by the missionaries? What is it in Māori religion that the Christian scriptures only augment, but do not supersede? What is the “duality in Māori existence” that Mere Rikiriki provided for?

A truly Catholic approach to these questions acknowledges, with the Second Vatican Council, that

Throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being... This awareness and recognition results in a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense.... (Decree on Non-Christian Religions, para. 2)

This positive statement echoes what the New Testament says about God being revealed to all peoples, though the experience of nature, and of divine providence (cf Acts 14:16-17). However, these ways of knowing God's power and goodness, don't clearly reveal God's *intentions* for us. God's saving intentions only came to light fully with the coming of Christ. And that can only be known in the way that historical events are known. They cannot be known by looking at nature, or interpreting cosmic events, or through dreams or messages from spirits. The story of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection can only be known by being passed on from the original witnesses, by those who became missionaries.

A characteristic of natural religions is that they leave people not being really sure about God's intentions for them. Many of their religious practices are aimed at placating the God or gods that might have been offended. Christian revelation superseded all that. Uncertainties and fears about sin and death have been replaced by the revelation of God's mercy and the certainty that results from Christ's resurrection. The uncertainties of pre-Christian religion and the certainty of Christian revelation cannot co-exist.

Moreover, there is no need to mix or combine them. Māori Christians can make a similar claim to the claim of Jewish Christians:

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the person of his son,...  
(Letter to the Hebrews, ch. 1, verses 1 & 2).

It is one thing to be grateful for what God has done through pre-Christian religion. It is another matter to claim it is still needed, to supplement Christian revelation. God's purposes have been *fully revealed* in Christ. Sinclair is probably right: those who do go back to pre-Christian religion, or try to combine it with Christian faith, do so to meet *another kind of need*, namely, their need to maintain a sense of independence of Pakeha and Pakeha missionaries. That is not a religious need as such.

But meeting that need involves reclaiming the past, which includes the religious past. And, as we saw, this has led to claims that Christian revelation needs to be supplemented by other prophecies. So, the challenge for followers of the Māramatanga is the challenge Christ puts before all his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:19) According to the Christian faith, Christ contains the *fullness* of God's revelation (cf Colossians 2:6-23).

And the challenge for the rest of us is to ensure that Christian revelation is presented in a way that truly affirms Māori for who they are. As Pope John Paul II said in Auckland in 1986:

The strengths of Māori culture are often the very values which modern society is in danger of losing: an acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of every aspect of life; a profound reverence for nature and the environment; a sense of community assuring every individual that he or she belongs; loyalty to family and a great willingness to share; an acceptance of death as part of life and a capacity to grieve and mourn the dead in a human way.

As you rightly treasure your culture, let the Gospel of Christ continue to penetrate and permeate it, confirming your sense of identity as a unique part of God's household.

It is as Māori that the Lord calls you; it is as Māori that you belong to the Church, the one body of Christ.

Or, in the words of Suzanne Aubert:

Let the Māori keep his culture. Aid him to preserve his good qualities and his customs so far as these are good and for the benefit of his race. Christianise him, educate him too, but do not aim to make a second-rate European out of him. Help him to be a good Māori, an educated Māori, and a true Christian before all. But be sure to let him stay Māori. (Quoted by Sinclair, page 33).

## 2. “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others discern” (1Corinthians, 14:29)

Christian tradition, starting with the teaching of Jesus himself, has always emphasised the need for *discernment*. Prophets must expect their prophecies to be tested for genuineness. And, according to St Paul, discernment is done by the other members of the community, not the prophets themselves.

Trying to combine Māori religion with Christian faith can lead to dispensing with the need for proper discernment, and to relativism and syncretism (cf page 206). At ra’s and on pilgrimages, and in the composition of songs, the meaning of Te Karere’s messages is discussed and handed on. But whether or not those messages actually came from her doesn’t seem to be seriously questioned.

What Sinclair describes on the two pilgrimages or missions to Waitangi in 1970 and 1971 highlights the need for objective standards of discernment:

There were approximately 50 pilgrims on the first mission, all prepared by dreams and messages... The cars travelled in convoy, stopping frequently to ensure that all members were well and comfortable. Pauro Peehi, and Aurora were in touch with the wairua, although they were in different cars. When late that evening they compared messages, they were not surprised to find that they were the same.

Beliefs about a past untouched by the Pakeha merged with ideals of Christianity and contemporary revelation. As in other missions, all forms of knowledge, derived from all possible sources, were assimilated and transformed into an instrument of reconciliation.

The decision to go to Waitangi demonstrates that these pilgrims were able to engage complex yet interwoven traditions that depended upon the authority of both biblical discourse and spiritual revelation. Their activities, their movements, and their discussions designate the extent to which political modulation relied upon such a mixture. With each successive trip, replete with revelations and re-assertions of spiritual privilege, the pilgrims to Waitangi laid claim to, and established their responsibility for, their past (pages 156 and 157).

## 3. “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:15-20)

On the basis of this teaching of Jesus, Christians have always understood that the genuineness of various devotional practices can be tested by what kind of difference they make to people’s lives. So what are the fruits of the Māramatanga? Without doubt, Māramatanga involves deep piety, and the sincerity of its adherents is not in question here. And, no doubt, it has also borne much good fruit.

But Mareikura himself felt it was necessary to name family violence as something that should not exist among his followers. He “exhorted his sons not to hit their wives, threatening to return the women to their people should the young men feel compelled to strike them” (page 81). Too often, even the people of the Māramatanga have felt powerless to change a culture in which violence is too easily accepted. Sinclair says “this is a pattern that has recurred, but even today there is little community intervention in domestic violence “ (page 204).

There is something wrong with the way Christianity is being lived when perpetrators of violence are sometimes given more support than is given to the victims.

#### **4. “Who sinned, Lord...? (John 9:1-3)**

When Jesus explained to his disciples that illness and accident are not necessarily linked to somebody’s sin, he was putting aside that deep-seated human tendency to link suffering with sin. Is his teaching being fully accepted when people still feel they must look for somebody’s sin, or even somebody’s unconscious violation of tapu, in order to account for an unexpected illness or accident?

#### **5. Secrecy**

The way in which the messages and practices of Māramatanga have been surrounded by secrecy is in contrast with the joyous, open, proclamation of the gospel. This is surely because the Māramatanga is primarily a device for preserving Māori identity in the face of invasion by outsiders.

To use a language that the majority of Pakeha cannot understand is to invoke boundaries, to provide protection from those who have managed to intrude in most aspects of Māori lives (page 6).

Māori cannot be blamed for wanting to preserve their identity. But, once again, there would have been less need to devise special strategies for survival if the Christian faith had been presented and practised in ways that respected Māori identity and Māori culture.

#### **Conclusion**

Through the services of Karen Sinclair, the leaders of the Māramatanga have enabled the wider community to glimpse the devotion, dedication, sacrifices and underlying motives of the people of the Māramatanga. With equal humility, the wider Catholic community should accept to share those underlying concerns, even as it points out what is necessary to maintain the integrity of Catholic faith.

### **APPENDIX**

The reflection I have offered here has been completely independent of the research done by the Reverend G Arbuckle SM. Much offence was taken at his report, and Sinclair echoes that disquiet (pp 124-127). I do not intend to discuss this in depth because I want my own reflection, based on Sinclair’s book, to remain completely separate from Arbuckle’s report.

However, it may help all concerned to know that Arbuckle was not defining Māori as migrants in the sense of new-comers to this country. Rather, he was acknowledging the difficulties experienced by Māori as a numerical minority surrounded by a larger more dominant culture. Sinclair herself refers to Māori “as a minority ethnic group” who must somehow deal with “the dominant culture” (page 211). That is the position that migrants find themselves in, and Arbuckle was making that comparison (Report, 1976). Earlier, he had spoken of Māori living “in conditions similar to migrants”; (Address 22 November 1970).

And if Arbuckle referred to the movement as a “cult”, it was in the sense that indigenous peoples who feel their very identity and existence are at risk have had different ways of looking for supernatural guidance and intervention – which is precisely how Sinclair herself seems to describe the Māori prophetic movements. I suppose that for some, and especially for North Americans, the very term “cult” immediately conjures up images of the bizarre. Perhaps Arbuckle could have done more to prevent his technical language being misunderstood.

#### **Footnote**

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair herself was a little careless when she spoke of the Treaty of Waitangi as guaranteeing Māori rights and “Pakeha sovereignty” (page 208). She also shows her unfamiliarity with Catholic teaching, confusing the Ascension with the Resurrection (page 92), and the virginal conception with the Immaculate conception (page 62).