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The Māori Conversion: Fatal Impact, Subversion or Transformation?

That there was a profound and extensive movement toward missionary Christianity by Māori during the 1830s & 40s cannot seriously be denied. The Church Missionary Society mission had begun in 1814, but it wasn't until 1825 that the first convert was baptised — Christian Rangī, though he was baptised on his deathbed and died the next day. However, by the early 1830s a small band of Māori believers had been formed. By 1833, the number of baptised Māori was about one hundred; five years further on (1838) the number was around one thousand. And in a further five years (1843), the figure exceeded ten thousand baptisms. By 1850 it was estimated that 90-95% of all Māori professed a Christian faith (although not all were baptised by this time).

Over the years, historians have offered two contrasting theories to account for this remarkable phenomenon. The first of these can be called the “fatal impact” theory and is based on the idea of “need”. The assumption is that new ideas are not adopted into a culture unless they are able to meet some perceived need within that culture. So, the theory goes, Māori were converted by a collective need that arose from the impact of Western contact upon their way of life. Colonialisation brought with it the disruptive impact of war, disease, and new technologies. As a consequence, Māori lost control of their traditional world and became “culturally confused”. It is at this point that Māori responded to the missionary message, and by so doing regained control of their rapidly changing world. Unfortunately, by embracing Christianity they also unwittingly destroyed their traditional culture. As the historian Keith Sinclair declares, “Ideas were as destructive as bullets.” By which he means that Māori culture was destroyed as much by the ideas of the missionaries as by the muskets traded by the “shipping”.

Now, although the fatal impact theory still retains a certain hold on the modern mind - especially as it reinforces anti-missionary prejudices - its influence is nonetheless slipping. I suspect this is partly due to the way it casts Māori in a rather passive light, as victims of colonialism, which is not so trendy these days. In addition, it's hard to know exactly how to define a concept such

as “cultural confusion” apart from stating that Māori must have had it otherwise they would not have converted!

The second theory I would term the “subversion” theory. It is based on the idea of “novelty”. Māori were acquiring new ideas all the time, not driven simply by need, but through being naturally curious and finding new ideas attractive. Such an approach preserves a far more active role for Māori in the conversion process. Māori are viewed as finding Christianity attractive for their own reasons and appropriating it to themselves on their own terms. An example would be the way that Māori enthusiastically embraced literacy in all its forms. In fact, for many, literacy becomes the dominant reason why Māori converted. As historian John Owen wrote, “Literacy was the Trojan horse which introduced otherwise unacceptable ideas into the Maori Camp.” It was because Christianity took on a greater prestige from its association with literacy that led Māori to its acceptance. After all, the Bible formed the bulk of the literature available to Māori, and some even argue that the missionaries wanted to keep it that way. The result is that historians like to turn the tables on the whole conversion process. James Belich speaks of “converting conversion”: instead of Māori being converted to Christianity, Christianity was itself converted by Māori and made to conform to their own view of the world.

There are, however, serious deficiencies with this theory. For a start, it makes the claim that a desire for literacy can in some manner be separated from the object of its desire: Christianity. Yet, such a desire only makes sense within a Christian framework where hearing the Word of God is so important. So, that Māori had a desire for literacy, already demonstrated that the conversion process had begun. There were traditional uses made of books by Māori (including being used as cartridge paper for ammunition!), and Māori also began to use writing for the purposes of general communication. But these were not the “killer apps” (to borrow a phrase from the computing world) that can explain why Māori embraced literacy with such enthusiasm.

Now, it is not that each of the theories we have considered is completely wrong-headed. In fact, it could be argued that both the fatal impact and the subversion theories have their ultimate origins to the missionaries themselves. The anti-war rhetoric of the missionaries, their opposition to Māori “superstition”, and their decrying the impact of western “shipping” on Māori morals and health, provides fertile ground for conversion theories based on “need”. While the “novelty” of Christian ideas to Māori when first introduced had taught the missionaries to be wary of signs of initial enthusiasm before a genuine Christian commitment had been tested by the process of time.

I would further suggest that these two theories reflect the long-standing tension in Christian missions between Proselytism and Syncretism. Proselytism can be defined as the process of conversion whereby a new religion simply replaces the old. The proselyte becomes like his or her teacher and rejects everything of the old way of life. Many see the conversion of Māori as a form of proselytism: English missionaries determined to make Māori into English Christians. Syncretism, on the other hand, can be viewed as being the new added to the old, with the old remaining essentially unchanged. Understanding conversion as a form of syncretism, leads many to suggest that Māori were never really “converted” at all, at least, not in the sense that the missionaries expected. Rather, the outward forms may have changed, but the traditional Māori heart remained intact.

But are these the only two options for understanding conversion? What if conversion was neither the replacement of the old, nor just the assimilation of the new? Some have suggested that a more nuanced model for conversion might be found in the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. For the incarnation allows for a transformation of the old in a way that neither denies culture, nor simply acquiesces to its demands. In the same way that the incarnation did not produce a non-Jewish Jesus, so too, Māori were converted as Māori but with a worldview transformed from the inside out.

A transformational theory of conversion is well illustrated by the example of Christian Rangi. He was an elderly chief living at Waitangi who came in contact with the missionaries at Paihia in about June 1824. He made a profession of faith in August 1825 and was baptised by Henry Williams in the September. He had come to the attention of the missionaries by his Sabbath observance and his disregard of the traditional tapu. But perhaps the greatest transformation came through his

experience of prayer, particularly, as he began to pray to the missionary God for a new heart within.

That Rangi prayed was not something foreign or unusual for Māori to do. Yet the manner of his prayer was being radically transformed. Traditional Māori karakia (prayer) seemed to have had a rather functional character, that is, effective prayer had to do with the right person uttering the right words, at the right time. By contrast, for the missionaries, prayer was more relational. It concerned the individual praying from a sincere heart, persistently, trusting that God would hear and answer. A transition can be observed in Rangi’s conversations with the missionaries. Earlier, Rangi appeared most concerned to obtain the exact form of words and would complain that he had forgotten the prayer he had been taught the previous week. In the end, Rangi came to understand prayer’s relational character and through subsequent personal experience was converted. He believed that God had answered his prayers and had given to him the new heart of which the missionaries spoke — a heart full of love toward the Lord Jesus.

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In this short account of Māori conversion, I have suggested that, despite the elements of truth they contain, the fatal impact and subversion theories are not able to adequately explain the experiences of Māori converts like Christian Rangi. Rangi was neither culturally confused nor terrified when he accepted the Christian message. Neither was he simply intrigued by the novelty of the missionary religion. By examining more closely Rangi’s experience of Christian prayer and drawing on the model of Christ’s incarnation, a theory of transformation would appear to be more instructive. Henry Williams, the missionary who baptised Christian Rangi, called him “a brand plucked from the burning!” Williams rejoiced in his conversion, not because Rangi was the model English Christian, but because it meant that on the last day there would be at least one tattooed face standing among those before the great white throne in heaven.