



Rev. Malcolm Falloon

Barriers to belief: A test of faith for early Māori converts

For the missionaries, there was the problem of communicating the Gospel in a way that could be understood by Māori. Yet, once understood, Māori still faced a number of obstacles to faith. Three such obstacles were the offensive nature of the message, the fear of ridicule, and the cost of discipleship.

OFFENSIVE MESSAGE

Of all the missionary ideas, the one that caused the most offence to Māori was the doctrine of hell. For the missionaries, the doctrine of God's future judgment was a vital component to their preaching and, in the end, also formed an important rationale for Māori converts to forsake utu and pursue peace. The missionaries had identified the traditional abode of the dead, Te Reinga, as a place of anguish and torment where the wicked became slaves of Wiro, the devil. What offended Māori was not that they were labelled as wicked; 'wicked' was a compliment that Māori of the day were happy to receive! Nor were they particularly offended by the Reinga being described as a place of fire, though they rejected such a notion. What truly offended Māori, especially rangatira of mana, was to be told that they would be slaves in the afterlife. To tell a high-born chief that he would become a slave – whether in this life or the next – was to give insult that demanded utu.

When a local Paihia chief, Tohitapu, was visited by Te Koikoi, he asked Henry Williams not to mention the place of fire. Te Koikoi was one of the great ones, along with the likes of Hongi Hika and Te Morenga, and many of the Paihia locals believed that Williams would not dare mention the subject to such a powerful chief. Williams knew that his freedom to preach the Gospel to both high and low, without fear or favour, was at stake. Consequently, as soon as Williams was introduced, he raised the topic with Te Koikoi in the "plainest manner possible" — not an easy thing to do in the circumstances. Te Koikoi simply asked Tohitapu if this was his usual mode of addressing them, to which Tohi replied that it was. Tohitapu tried to smooth things over by asking Williams to give Te Koikoi a present in return, an axe perhaps: Williams refused. Six weeks later Te Koikoi returned with a large party (taua muru) to demand utu!

FEAR OF RIDICULE

Traditionally, Māori tribal leadership exercised little direct control over individuals, especially males. Māori ariki were not like European kings, though they had great influence and in time of war their orders were obeyed implicitly. Instead, day to day behaviour was largely constrained by the laws of tapu, utu and mana. To be governed by tapu meant to be constantly vigilant so that no transgression of sacred rules or ceremonies was allowed to occur. In addition, the law of utu was a substantial check on personal conduct. Knowing that every action, whether good or bad, was subject to the reciprocity of others, made Māori very circumspect. If part of the law of tapu was a fear of the sacred, then the law of utu involved the fear of the consequences. But perhaps the most powerful motivator of personal behaviour was that of mana. Mana involved a person's sense of honour and shame and was largely shaped by the approval or ridicule of the wider family group.

Early Māori converts did not like being laughed at for it conflicted with their sense of mana. Yet, as they responded to the missionary karakia and began to pray themselves, they had to endure the ridicule of their whānau. But it was not only family that were laughing at them. They were also ridiculed by the European sea captains and sailors, who had no interest in seeing their customers converted by the missionaries whom they despised. The missionary, George Clarke, had a conversation with one convert who felt unable to make a public profession of faith through fear of being laughed at. "I told him he must not mind laughs," said Clarke, "for if he was ashamed of Jesus, Jesus at last would be ashamed of him; and directed him to pray for grace to be delivered from the fear of men." As more and more Māori converted to Christianity, the social stigma quickly evaporated, but for those early converts the potential loss of mana and the fear of ridicule loomed large.

¹ Read the account online in Henry Williams' journal, www.enzb.auckland.ac.nz/document?wid=3815, p74-5 & p79-80.

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Many changes in life-style were required of new converts. But, perhaps the most radical, especially for Māori of rank, was the requirement to only live with one wife, and relinquish any other marriage bond. It had been the condition for anyone living at the mission stations, as Rāwiri (David) Taiwhanga discovered. He had made a name for himself as one of Hongi Hika's warriors, but now, turning his back on war, he was living as a married man at Paihia with his own house and garden. But when he took a second wife to live with him, Charles Davis was sent to explain the situation and to issue a painful ultimatum. After an anxious night of waiting, the missionaries received Taiwhanga's reply in the form of a letter agreeing to their conditions. Two years later he was baptized.

It was one thing to maintain monogamy on the mission stations, but quite another to determine what would happen in surrounding kāinga. Paratene (Broughton) Ripi was the chief of the emerging Christian village of Mawe (near Kaikohe). To the missionaries' surprise, he had given up his extra wives even before coming forward for baptism. But others of his village were less keen to follow his lead – especially the women who had children by their husbands! The reality was, however, that many of these polygamous marriages were a source of continual strife and rivalry that often overflowed in violent conflict. In addition, a number of the wives were in fact war captives who had been reserved by higher-ranking chiefs leaving many younger men without any marriage prospects at all. Conversion to Christianity led to a realignment of gender relationships amongst Māori as slave wives were released from their past obligations and were free to remarry as Christian women.

There was some debate amongst the missionaries as to whether a strict policy on monogamy was the best approach. William Ellis, a missionary in the Pacific Islands with the London Missionary Society, had proposed that polygamy be tolerated during a transitional period, though he noted that in practice most converts opted for monogamy.

“As more and more Māori converted to Christianity, the social stigma quickly evaporated, but for those early converts the potential loss of mana and the fear of ridicule loomed large.”

William Yate had advocated for a similar policy in New Zealand. However, as the first converts had already embraced monogamy, the majority of his missionary colleagues were reluctant to undermine this costly commitment.

Paratene Ripi became the leading Māori apologist in establishing monogamy among Māori Christians. For instance, Ripi had accompanied the missionaries as they sought to extend their work to the far north. The question of monogamy was a clear concern for Kaitaia Māori in hosting this new mission station. William Williams recorded Ripi's testimony:

“Since I have believed, I never quarrel with my wife, as I used to do.” To which a native replied, “It is because you have only one wife.” Ripi answered, “I had three wives, who are now all alive; by one I had 7 children, and by another 3, who all died some time ago, but when I began to think of the things of God, I thought with myself, if I keep these three wives, I shall always find them a snare to me. I therefore cast off two and find myself much happier with one.”

TEST OF FAITH

Here then were three barriers that had to be overcome by early Māori converts. That they were able to do so, demonstrated the costly nature of their discipleship and the reality of their conversion to Christ. It was not an easy step for them to make, but one that required firm convictions, courageous hearts and a clear vision of a new and different way of life. Their bold testimony counters those historians who would wish to marginalise such conversions as being merely nominal or necessarily superficial in nature.