Are the Maori separate and equal?

Integration is one solution to a history of oppression. New Zealand's churches tried another.

by Philip Jenkins in the October 25, 2016 issue

Saint Mary's Maori Church in Tikitiki, New Zealand. Thinkstock.

If New Zealand registers at all in the American consciousness, it is as an incredibly beautiful landscape associated with cinematic hobbits and orcs. But the country also has a surprising religious history, as major churches have made some daring attempts to rectify the historical injustices of colonialism.

When Europeans encountered the islands in the late 18th century, the Maori inhab itants possessed a tribal culture with splendid visual arts and an elaborate mythological system akin to that of Polynesia. After long wars, in 1840 the British and the Maori signed the Treaty of Waitangi. New Zealand became a British possession, while Maori land rights were acknowledged. Soon, though, British settlers flooded in, and by 1900 the Maori made up only 6 percent of the population. British settlers hugely expanded their lands, usually at the expense of Maori rights. By this point, some observers were forecasting the extinction of the Maori, at least as a separate culture.

From the 1920s onward, though, Maori voices began to be heard once more, partly because of their foothold in the churches. Although Maori people did not abandon their traditional beliefs, the vast majority converted to one or another of the major denominations, especially the Anglican and Catholic churches. Today, virtually no Maori describe themselves as full-time followers of traditional religion, although most draw on those older folkways. Maori clergy and ministers were appointed, and there were distinctively Maori centers for learning and theological training. In 1928, the Anglican Church appointed its first Maori bishop.

During the 1960s, New Zealand experienced the kind of social revolutions that swept most of the West, with intense questioning about bygone acts of oppression and exploitation. White New Zealanders, the *pakeha*, became deeply aware of their Maori neighbors, who today make up about 14 percent of the population, some 600,000 people. Successive governments have made reparations for past land grabs and treaty violations. The goal has been to create a society with a full role for all its member groups, whether Maori, *pakeha*, or Pacific Islander. All belong to a common New Zealand, that is equally *Aotearoa*, the Maori term for the islands.

The churches have played a vanguard role in these struggles, and liberation theology made its impact among both Anglicans and Catholics. During the 1960s, Anglican thinkers explored ways of inculturating the gospel into local languages and ways of thinking, beginning a lengthy series of experimental liturgies. That process culminated in the New Zealand Prayer Book of 1989, a version of the Book of Common Prayer, but designed for a society and landscape radically different from the foggy islands that first heard the dignified words from 1662. Although so much of the book cries out for quotation, we might especially look at the Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption, the *Benedicite Aotearoa*, which urges, “Dolphins and kahawai, sea lion and crab, coral, anemone, pipi and shrimp: give to our God your

thanks and praise. . . . You Maori and *Pakeha*, women and men, all who inhabit the long white cloud: give to our God your thanks and praise."

The year after the Prayer Book came out, that once staid Anglican Church was associated with some controversial activism during Queen Elizabeth's visit to the country. During a Waitangi Day ceremony, and in the queen's presence, Maori bishop Whakahuihui Vercoe delivered an incendiary speech complaining about violations of the 1840 treaty and demanding justice for his people. In 1992, the church made the dramatic decision to form three separate sections for its diverse communities or *tikanga*—for Maori, *Pakeha*, and Polynesians, each under its own head. Vercoe headed the Maori *tikanga*, in what is now titled the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia.

That tripartite division points to a controversial theme in many modern struggles for justice, and one very familiar in an American context. If a race or community has been oppressed historically, can that best be remedied by full inclusion into the larger society or by some form of separate cultural development, with separate institutional structures? New Zealand has strongly opted for the latter solution in the form of biculturalism and not just in the Anglican context. Catholics too set up a separate Maori Catholic council in the 1980s.

But the problems with such a situation are many, not least in formalizing segregation. That is doubly difficult in the New Zealand context, where so many people have mixed ancestry, including Vercoe himself. Much depends on self-identification. The church asserts "the right of every person to choose any particular cultural expression of the faith."

Issues of identity politics remain alive, but the scale of the resulting revolution is evident. In 2004, Vercoe became the Anglican primate of the whole province, and today that primacy is shared between three bishops, one of whom is Maori.

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