

## Forgive them Whanau for they know not what they do: the Maori view and the environment

Brad Spiers

November 2012

bspiers.com

Upon reviewing, so called Maori viewpoints, with regard to conceptions of the environment and the place or role or relationship that humans should have to the environment, I find some interesting differences within the 'Maori view' itself which require more examination. I will also, of necessity, have to briefly explore the use of 'Maori' as a definitional category by Maori and Pakeha scholars as a 'different' way of seeing the world. The use of 'Maori' often fudges the point rather than clearing it up, as when we read of a 'Maori viewpoint' we are inclined to automatically think that Maori are and always have been a unified culture and that what occupies a position of cultural sanction in one area of Aotearoa by Maori necessarily will hold elsewhere in Aotearoa by Maori. And yet, 'Maori' as a category *does* explain the recent dichotomous dialogue in studies of Maori, so it does have value as an explanation of the recent conceptions of alternative views that have arisen out of a perceived differential relation to Pakeha. In reviewing 'Maori' approaches to the environment; I do intend Maori to mean the recent usage which binds together a diverse group of people under one banner and in doing so I hope to explore the why and the how of such a phenomenon. In this way I fully intend to view 'Maori' as a religion; but not as a religion akin to the 'religions' that religious studies scholars 'find' upon looking for phenomena that 'fits' an idea and ideal of what they have, prior to looking, already decided will be there *to be discovered*, and

moreover to be discovered *as religion*. I have in mind David Tracy's observation that "without some theory about which phenomena will count or not count as religious" it is "difficult to see how any purely descriptive or purely functional analysis could proceed at all".<sup>1</sup> In addition, Malory Nye can claim that "the very act of writing a particular type of text is a discursive strategy which constructs through representation the 'reality' that the text takes as its object"<sup>2</sup>; religion is this 'object' created through the text of the 'object' that is taken as reality when in fact it 'is not' reality prior to the text of the object as reality. Instead of, and counter to, conceiving of religion in a way that would be analogous to what one would encounter in such places as an encyclopaedia of world religions, and, in addition, taking note of Mark C. Taylor's remark that "investigators create...the objects and truths they profess to discover"<sup>3</sup>, I take it on the chin that 'Maori' is *not* a traditionally conceived of 'church' styled religion, yet I will continue to proceed, as, to my understanding, 'religion' with its connotation of its root in Latin of *religare*: to bind back, does adequately account – and I would argue religion is the only definition that adequately accounts – for this creation of a phenomenon of a 'Maori approach', which for the purposes of this essay will be confined to the 'Maori approach' as this approach applies to the environment. I also wish to cast my net wider, as it seems to me that 'Maori'<sup>4</sup> are not the only people who are participants in this Maori religion of the environment; as a religion its participants are those who share the concepts and value system of that religion and perhaps also those who argue from the standpoint of that particular conception of a Maori viewpoint. Robert Considine notes that the Maori prior to 'contact' had "cultures deeply connected to the land" and yet (and because of this attachment to land) were formed into groupings called hapu, not a nation as the word 'Maori' would imply, and that these "hapu", "operated

---

<sup>1</sup> David Tracy (1984) 'Is a Hermeneutics of Religion Possible?' in L.S. Rouner (ed.) *Religious Pluralism* (University of Notre Dame Press: Indiana), p 121.

<sup>2</sup> Malory Nye (2000) 'Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religioning: Religious Studies and Contemporary Cultural Debates', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12, p 449.

<sup>3</sup> Mark C. Taylor (1998) 'Introduction' in Mark C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago), p 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Here I have in mind ethnically Maori people.

independently and [each] practiced its own customs.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, Hirini Matunga, writing in his chapter ‘Waahi Tapu: Maori Sacred Sites’ claims that:

Maori attitudes to land, natural resources and *waahi tapu* (sacred sites) are based on this close ‘kinship’ link. Humans are not separate from the environment but are an intimate part of it. Because of this kinship link, humans have a responsibility to safeguard Papatuanuku, Ranginui and natural and physical resources from violation and destruction.<sup>6</sup>

Matunga makes an argument for the conception of whakapapa to the environment, via kinship to all creation, the land (Papatuanuku) and the sky (Ranginui) and everything in between. Here he follows

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Consedine (2001) ‘Shattering the Myths’, in R & J Consedine *Healing Our History* (Penguin Books: Auckland), p 78. Note here Consedine uses the word ‘cultures’ (i.e. plural), to denote that Maori is not a culture but is cultures. To clear this up we must note that ‘Maori’ is like the word ‘sheep’, in that if you have one sheep or if you have five-hundred sheep, you still say the word ‘sheep’ or ‘Maori’; not five-hundred sheeps or five-hundred Maoris. So when Maori is used, it *is* used often as the plural for ‘Maoris’; and sometimes, to be completely clear on this point, scholars will actually use the word ‘Maoris’ to point to this singular-plural problematic when they mean the plural of Maori, yet they are often ‘spell-checked’ by often unknowing yet well-meaning scholars who cross out ~~Maoris~~ and replace it with Maori (and in so doing they perpetuate this misunderstanding surrounding ‘Maori’ as a category – the well-meaning spellcheckers do). I will hopefully clear this point up when I get to the divergent uses of whakapapa further in the paper, and will therefore show that it is entirely out of prior mentioned scholars powers who ‘get it wrong’ to actually get it right, as according to (one reading of) whakapapa all Maori are connected via whakapapa to all creation and hence are ‘all Maori’; and yet, also via (another different reading of) whakapapa, Maori split themselves into founding canoes and iwi(s) *based* on whakapapa understood NOT as a connection with ALL creation, but as a *defined* whakapapa as genealogy or blood lines linking Whanau to Hapu and Hapu to Iwi, which by its nature is exclusionary (they decide to not follow this ‘linking’ to its logical conclusion). Simon Hope has noted this by concluding that “only *certain* Maori can represent *certain* things Maori, because only those Maori are the authorities on those things Maori”, [(2006) ‘Self-Determination and Cultural Difference’, *Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (June), p 27. My emphasis – Hope was discussing the fact that ‘a Maori’, by that fact of ‘being a Maori’ cannot hope to have access to a particular Hapu or Iwi history if they are not of that Iwi or Hapu, so that along with Pakeha scholars, whom are ‘dodgy’ in terms of their expertise in the study of Iwi and/or Hapu histories, so too are *most* Maori, in fact all Maori bar those whom are of the particular Iwi or Hapu are, what I’ll term ‘auto-dodgy’ as historians or scholars of that particular group.] To validate and extend and also to give a context to this point, the reader is asked to look at any Maori department, or indeed, a Maori scholar’s profile page and they will find a whakapapa that is selective and hence is whakapapa defined *as* bloodlines or western-style genealogy which is counter to the idea of whakapapa as a link to all creation. So when a scholar talks of Maori and is correct on one account they are wrong on the other account; and vice versa; and the reason for this lies in the fact of the concepts themselves being at heart problematic – perhaps we ought to lose ‘Maori’ and be more correct and ‘scholarly’ and refer to this loose grouping as the ‘Maoris’?

<sup>6</sup> Hirini Matunga (1994) ‘Waahi Tapu: Maori Sacred Sites’ in Carmichael, D. & Hubert, J. et al (eds.) *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* (Routledge: New York), p 220.

the path that all Maori are Maori by their link through whakapapa back through genealogy to the original time when humans were first conceived and created – but by not thinking this claim through to its apparent conclusion whereby all those whom share the human form<sup>7</sup> are Maori, including those whose genealogy played itself out in different lands and different contexts but are none-the-less, via genealogy and whakapapa to all creation, Maori. Robert Sullivan’s poem, “Waka 99”<sup>8</sup> completes this logic of whakapapa kinship relations; particularly interesting is the ending with ‘of those who touched the veins / who touched the veins / who touched the veins / of the men and women from the time / of Kupe and before’:

If waka could be resurrected  
  
they wouldn’t just come out  
  
from museum doors smashing  
  
glass cases revolving and sliding  
  
doors on their exit  
  
they wouldn’t just come out  
  
of mountains as if liquefied  
  
from a frozen state

---

<sup>7</sup> Originally, that is prior to ‘contact’ ‘Maori’ meant ordinary people, whereby Chiefs were not Maori as they were Chiefs (and thus NOT ordinary); this concept has undergone a massive change to denote and level Maori society into a bunch of ‘Maoris’.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sullivan, ‘Waka 99’ in P. Morris, H. Ricketts & M. Grimshaw (eds.) (2004) *Spirit Abroad: A Second Selection of New Zealand Spiritual Verse*, (Godwit: Auckland), p 29. I should note that Simon Hope has a full quotation of Sullivan’s poem in his paper, ‘Self-Determination and Cultural Difference’, but that I was aware of Waka 99 prior to reading Hope; tis always a happy serendipity to encounter a thought pattern one has been thinking on, elaborated (and hence validated) by a scholar with more credentials to the task than oneself, whom bereft of qualifications is wary to advance in such contested and emotionally invested territory as is the cases of Maori Studies in New Zealand – I am reminded of a *New Yorker* cartoon in which the message was that ‘theory is not a four letter word’ and so also Allen Curnow’s ‘A Four Letter Word’: “A wood god bothering cantor / rolls out his call. He names / tanekaha, kaiwaka, taraire. / Mispronounced, any of these / can strike dead and dumb”. [(1988) *Continuum: New and Later Poems*, (Auckland University Press: Auckland), p 214.] It should be apparent that I have in the past been told ‘where to go’ by, as it so happens, a Post-Graduate student in English who is ethnically Maori, for ‘bothering wood gods’ as a *Pakeha*.

the resurrection wouldn't just  
come about this way  
the South Island turned to wood  
waiting for the giant crew  
of Maui and his brothers  
bailers and anchors turned back  
to what they were when they were strewn  
about the country by Kupe  
and his relations  
the resurrection would happen  
in the blood of the men and women  
the boys and girls  
who are blood relations  
of the crew whose veins  
touch the veins who touched the veins  
of those who touched the veins  
who touched the veins  
who touched the veins  
of the men and women from the time

of Kupe and before.

The resurrection will come

out of their blood.

But counter to Matunga's own argument he quotes Alex Nathan at length who can also claim:

There are varying definitions and perceptions of *waahi tapu* in common use by Maori...Any place or feature that holds special significance to a particular *iwi* (tribe) or *hapu* (subtribe) can be *waahi tapu*, but such places may not necessarily be significant to any other group. The existence and history of such sites has been known to our people for many generations and the stories have been retained and recalled in our oral traditions. When exotic re-forestation began in 1924 the pleas of our *tupuna* (ancestors) to have *waahi tapu* excluded from planting areas were ignored. The legacy of that arrogance is evident today in a highly modified landscape. Within living memory many culturally important landscape features have been destroyed by land development and re-forestation.<sup>9</sup>

While Alex Nathan does not elaborate on the reason for the need to engage in reforestation; he does make a distinctively different claim with regard to whakapapa to that of Matunga. Where Matunga privileges a conception of whakapapa as a relation to all creation, Nathan highlights and focuses on a whakapapa as limiting, as defined and as exclusionary because 'there are varying definitions and perceptions' and that 'any place or feature that holds special significance to a

---

<sup>9</sup> Alex Nathan (1991) 'Waahi tapu protection and management: case study, Waipoua Forest', *World Archaeological Bulletin*, 5, p 49-51. Cited in Matunga (1994), p 224.

particular iwi or hapu...may not necessarily be significant to any other group', and by other group he means other iwi or hapu or/and also Pakeha.

John Patterson, in his article 'Respecting Nature the Maori Way' bases his viewpoint of a 'Maori Way' on a concept of whakapapa as a link to all creation:

[t]he *mauri* of all creatures are interconnected. If one creature suffers unnecessarily, that causes unnecessary harm to many others. After all, all creatures are regarded as kin, related through the whakapapa or genealogical tables that trace all beings back to Papa and Rangi, Earth and Sky. The life force or *mauri* of each creature descends through these genealogical chains, and so is related to that of all other creatures.<sup>10</sup>

Patterson also employs a hyper-real distinction between Maori views of their relation to nature, and like Matunga has not thought this through to its conclusion, and those of Lynn White:

A striking feature of a Maori environmental philosophy is that it does not ignore the fact that we cannot leave the natural world alone. We do have to eat, for example. Although we are urged to treat the environment with great respect, with the respect due to kin and to children of great gods, *reasonable use* of natural creatures and materials is allowed for. But the underlying philosophy is in sharp contrast with the familiar background to Western thinking, the biblical idea that humans are superior to the natural world, that we have a God-given sovereignty over other creatures.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> John Patterson (1999) 'Respecting Nature: the Maori Way', *The Ecologist*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January/February), p 33.

<sup>11</sup> Patterson (1999), p 36. My emphasis.

Patterson unwittingly draws parallels with Locke and his understanding that ‘reason’, which is god given, is the basis of our right to use the environment ‘reasonably’. Stephen Duffin has analysed the perceived differences between Western derived thought and that of Maori in regard to the environment to find that *the differences are not*: in short they are hyper-real. He notes that Locke argued that as humans are in possession of reason, which is God-given<sup>12</sup>, humans have an implicit sanction from god to use the resources of the natural world ‘with or within reason’ or as per Patterson’s ‘reasonable use’, which is nothing other than reason able (able due to reason?):

Locke suggests that planted in humans, by God, is a strong desire towards self-preservation. This desire, along with reason, which is the internal voice of God, gives humans the right to use of creatures, and it is by reason that they discover which animals are serviceable.<sup>13</sup>

By attempting to contrast Maori views to the environment with those of the so called ‘biblical idea’ Patterson is misunderstanding Lynn White; as White does survey and setup a distinction of a holistic view of man to nature and ‘environment’ that is contrasted to a individualistic view of humanity *apart* from nature. However, where Patterson gets it wrong is that White was setting up this distinction in order that he can show how the Biblical tradition *has* created the environmental crisis; however, this is not to say that the Biblical tradition has been the cause of environmental degradation. It is quite the opposite. The biblical tradition *has created* the environmental crisis in that it is the dialogue between the two (basic) branches of Christianity that has allowed us to come

---

<sup>12</sup> I would be remiss here if I did not note that humans actually took reason from God by Eve’s eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; so to say that reason is ‘god given’ is not quite correct. Yes, we did get reason from god, but god did not give it ‘freely’, hence the punishment of being kicked out of God’s presence, as expressed in Gotye’s (2011) ‘Somebody That I Used To Know’, *Somebody That I Used To Know* (Eleven: A Music Company): “But you didn’t have to cut me off / Make out like it never happened and that we were nothing / And I don’t even need your love / But you treat me like a stranger and that feels so rough / No you didn’t have to stoop so low / Have your friends collect your records and then change your number / I guess that I don’t need that though / Now you’re just somebody that I used to know”.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Duffin (2004) ‘The Environmental Views of John Locke and the Maori People of New Zealand’, *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 26 (Winter), p 392.



to see our effects on the environment and then to debate our role towards and within the environment. White recalls the approach of St. Francis of Assisi:

St. Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation. He failed.<sup>14</sup>

While the St. Franciscan approach to the environment might look and feel like a superior ethos it is in fact an ethos that fails, as it shirks all responsibility. If man ought to be humble and be just another animal along with all other creations, then man cannot decide to limit himself in his use of nature; it is only when man adequately recognises that he and he alone above other animals has the ability (whether we 'like' it or not) to control and affect the environment that he can then decide what his effects will be. Louis Pojman, surveying Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', notes that "To suppose, as White does, that Christianity is the sole cause of our crisis is to support a thesis that lacks evidence."<sup>15</sup> I think that Pojman is correct in pointing out that it is not only those of the Christian tradition who have affected huge environmental changes, but that perhaps it is *only* those of the Christian tradition who are cognisant of a changing environmental situation as something to be controlled. This will be made plain when we look at a recent article regarding Maori and their conceptions of the environment.

Jacinta Ruru in her chapter 'Wilderness as a walled garden' argues that Maori used the land to nourish their survival via hunting and collecting the flora and the fauna, and that New Zealand was

---

<sup>14</sup> Lynn White (2001) [originally 1967] 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' in L. Pojman (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, (Wadsworth Thomson Learning: Belmont, California), p 18.

<sup>15</sup> Louis Pojman (2001) 'Western Philosophy of Nature: The Roots of Our Ecological Situation', in L. Pojman (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, (Wadsworth Thomson Learning: Belmont, California), p 10.

Maori's 'large garden estate'. A comparison may be made here between the idea that Maori are or will be intrinsically better environmentalists than those who derive from a Western based tradition towards land and conservation:

The lands and water all over the country became home. Maori *learnt* to hunt for and collect the flora and fauna found in the forests, wetlands and estuaries. The land nourished their survival. Aotearoa New Zealand was their large garden estate.<sup>16</sup>

Ruru also shows a striking lack of understanding as to how and to what end conservation legislation is aimed by the prohibition on taking threatened native species:

In creating a space for potential access and use of flora and fauna within national parks, has the garden wall been dismantled? Many Maori would still argue no, for the policy remains layered in paternalistic tape. The policy has yet to recognise that Maori have already successfully been the stewards of these lands for hundreds of years, have little interest in annihilating the existing flora and fauna...The garden wall metaphor is an obstacle for Maori wishing to access native flora and fauna. It remains telling that recreational fishing and hunting for introduced species is, if not an encouraged activity, at least a permitted activity in national parks (a cultural activity initially important to those with a British ancestry), even though introduced species threaten the survival of native flora and fauna. In comparison, Maori taking of Indigenous flora and fauna is discouraged despite this being integral to the survival of their culture.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacinta Ruru (2011) 'Wilderness as a walled garden' in M. Abbott & R. Reeve (eds.) *Wild Heart: The possibility of wilderness in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Otago University Press: Dunedin), p 172. My emphasis – the point I wish to point out is that learning is the application of reason; or Locke's: 'it is by reason that they discover which animals are serviceable'.

<sup>17</sup> Ruru (2011), p 178-179.

The reader should note that I have read this paragraph over and over and I still hold out hope that there is a missing word or comma that would radically change the meaning; otherwise, that is, if there is no typo and Ruru is saying what she means then she seems to equate hunting with conservation and also that the heavy restrictions on, for example, the taking of native birds as somehow contributing to these birds' threatened status. For Ruru, there would be no threatened bird species in Aotearoa if only Maori were allowed to freely hunt for the table?<sup>18</sup> I do think that this *is* what she is calling for because she mentions how introduced species are allowed to be hunted (such as introduced Deer species) 'even though introduced species threaten the survival of native flora and fauna'. It is very far from clear how, to Ruru, hunting and shooting deer is not seen as limiting the impacts that Deer etc have on the native flora. One would think that less Deer equals less impact? I also want to point out that Ruru is for the hunting of threatened species of birds as it is 'integral to the survival of their culture'. Who does she mean by 'their'? The Maori culture or the culture of the birds understood through their whakapapa connections to Ranginui and Papatuanuku and their descendent sons? Problems arise from each viewpoint: if she means the Maori culture then Ruru is clearly placing Maori people and their culture over and above nature which is counter to a conception of whakapapa to all creation elaborated by Patterson and Matunga; on the other hand, if Ruru is meaning the cultural survival of the birds<sup>19</sup> then she is also placing herself over and above the birds as the decider of their fate, but more importantly she is making a claim of whakapapa to all creation that is counter to that of Nathan and also counter to the argument she has made leading up to that particular statement in which the 'garden' is a 'garden' for the Maori *to*

---

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps I can be serious but also have my tongue in cheek by pointing out that she *is* correct that there would be no threatened species if Maori were given free rein to hunt threatened birds; but it would not be that the threatened nature of the birds would disappear, but the birds themselves would go and hence their threatened status along with them. Why? Well it is common knowledge that the birds of Aotearoa evolved over millions of years without predators and many will breed one chick per year and when their number is in the hundreds taking even one adult can and does actually knock back years of recovery... 'she'll be right mate' just does not take the issue seriously.

<sup>19</sup> Let us leave to one side how exactly hunting native birds would help to maintain the culture of birds being hunted from their threatened status.

use. Statements such as those made in the same vein as Ruru leave questions begging to be asked.

Erich Kolig has asked some of them:

such news invite the question, not only as to whether indigenes are conservationists and wise resource users now, but also whether indigenous people, or tribal, pre-industrial societies sui generis have traditionally been environment-conscious and sensitive in their dealings with their environment.<sup>20</sup>

The answer to these questions lies in understanding whether or not those outside of the Christian tradition actually see the environment crisis. As we have seen Ruru already claim that ‘Maori have already successfully been the stewards of these lands for hundreds of years’ and ‘have little interest in annihilating the existing flora and fauna’, we must ask how is it that Ruru can forget, as a relation via whakapapa, the fate of and:

the extinction of several native bird species, among them the several [eleven: 11] species of the giant flightless moa...[i]n addition also the giant swan and pelican, the flightless goose and coot, the giant eagle and the adzebill [who] may have been driven to extinction by the Maori already in the early part of their colonisation of the islands. All in all 28 to 35 species of birds may have been pushed over the edge by Maori<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Erich Kolig (2002) ‘Guardians of Nature or Ecologists of the Stomach? The Indigenous Cultural Revival in New Zealand, Resource Use and Nature Conservation’ in E. Kolig and H. Muckler (eds.) *Politics of Indigeneity in the South Pacific: Recent problems of identity in Oceania*, (LIT: Hamburg), p 106.

<sup>21</sup> Kolig (2002), p 110-111. In fact, silhouettes of these birds grace the wall half the way up the stairs to the second floor of the indoor exhibition at the Zealandia wildlife sanctuary in Wellington. Helpfully it is noted that they were made extinct ‘prior to European settlement’, while the other half is ‘after European settlement’; the fact here of not owning ones actions is readily apparent with the insistence on stating these extinctions in relation only to European settlement. Who exactly was here prior to European settlement? I encourage Ruru and those of her mien to ‘walk in my footsteps’ up that transition at Zealandia.

Successful stewardship? Or forgetful stewardship? One answer might be that Maori have come to value the environment because *of* the destruction they have wrought, and this puts me in mind of Coleridge and his Albatross which the Ancyent Marinere had previously shot “with my cross bow” and hung around his neck<sup>22</sup>:

Beyond the shadow of the ship

I watch’d the water-snakes:

They mov’d in tracks of shining white;

And when they rear’d, the elfish light

Fell off in hoary flakes...

O happy living things! No tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gusht from my heart,

And I bless’d them unaware!

Sure my kind saint took pity on me,

And I bless’d them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;

And from my neck so free

---

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge (2006) ‘The Ancyent Marinere’ in James Fenton (ed.) *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poems selected by James Fenton*, (Faber and Faber: London), p 64, 70 – 71.

The Albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea.

The Ancyent Marinere claims to bless the unaware water-snakes 'unaware', but is of course quite aware of what he is doing; now having blessed the water-snakes in the 'self-same' moment the Albatross, whose death was like a millstone around his neck, fell off and was freed from round his neck/the Marinere is free from the millstone of having previously killed the Albatross because he is now blessing the water-snakes 'sure my kind saint' Francis would forgive and take pity on him. Therefore I am inclined to conclude that Maori despite claims to the contrary do not actually see themselves as a part of all creation, but instead they see themselves as apart *from* all creation as humans endowed with reason which places a constant question onto Maori *as* environmentalists: what should we *reasonably* do? In this way Maori is not an alternative as is claimed by the many who do claim so.