

From Bishop Peter Cullinane
14 August 2019

Dear Susan,

First of all, congratulations on your book *Listening to the People of the Land* into which you have put such care, and thank you for your thoughtfulness in sending me a copy. I have read most of it twice! I have learned much from it, and I hope others will too. This had been made easier by your own and others' articulate and readable writing styles.

I believe the book's core claims are convincingly argued: a symbiotic relationship between the Church and State means that both must bear responsibility for the ways colonization so seriously damaged Maori civilization and well-being, with continuing consequences that show up in the worst kinds of statistics. That makes this a justice issue. It creates an obligation on the Christian Churches and the State to repair as far as possible the damage. And to the extent that we are all beneficiaries of what resulted, that means all of us. (The specific questions named throughout the book, and the practical suggestions in the later chapters, are very helpful.)

I have felt challenged to take another look at things I have previously written about secularization (V secularism). Looking beyond Maoridom, I still think that animistic religions' fears of breaching taboos and need to appease vengeful gods must surely inhibit human creativity, human responsibility, the development of the sciences, and even human rights. The kinds of incantations and witchcraft to which some indigenous peoples are subjected are in their own way de-humanizing. However, I have never thought of Maori religion this way because, as I have written elsewhere, those to whom Maori pray in gratitude for the earth's resources are not gods in the sense of classical pantheism; I have likened them to guardian angels, but now perhaps I would call them representatives of kaitiakitanga.

I am not sure why you see so much significance in the lateness of the term "monotheism"; of far greater significance is the origin of monotheism in the centuries-long struggle of Israel's prophets to show that the God who was involved in their history was "Lord", i.e. the only one who was ultimately God and that the other gods were not. And this history was not "Western".

Coming back to the collusion of Church and State: you refer to "ingrained convictions about the superiority of (the colonizers') culture" (30). "Superiority" implies comparison. So what are we comparing? There are some comparisons that show Maori culture as clearly superior. I think of their sense of God's presence in all creation, and coming out of that, kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga; their understanding of property and ownership being subject to the needs of the common good; their socio-political order that honoured whanaungatanga, participation, and subsidiarity; etc. These are spiritual, social, economic and political aspects of Maori culture, and they are clearly "superior" to the excesses of Western individualism and capitalism and our contrived forms of democracy. In fact, they are very close to Catholic social teaching of recent centuries.

But seeing it is Western "culture" that the book compares to Maori values, perhaps there are other points of comparison that might help explain the colonizers' assumptions about having something "superior" to offer – even though they were wrong in the ways they trampled over Maori values. One thinks of, for example, the architecture, art, music and literature coming out of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, much of it inspired by the Christian faith; the vindication of human rights that came out of the Enlightenment; the technology that came out of the Industrial Revolution; the philosophical works of Arab scholars in the early Middle Ages inherited by Christian theologians of Europe and scientists

later on, etc. My point here is not the comparisons themselves, but the generalizations by some authors who seem to condemn any suggestion of superiority of Western culture. Generalizations tend to be half-truths, I am only suggesting better nuancing.

The same goes for claims made regarding the role of Christianity. Yes, by its failure to recognize the profound truths within the Maori world-view, Christians failed themselves and they failed Maori. But again, generalizations are half truths. I agree with Mike Riddell: he acknowledges that “..the expansionist and colonial project is driven by world-views influenced by Christianity” (256), but when he asks whether looking to Christianity for remedies might be too much like drinking from the same well that caused the malady, he comments: “sometimes the stream is polluted not at its source, but by tributaries that flow into it along the way... “

Then, speaking of the “two torrents of wisdom” he feels caught between (the heritage of Catholicism in all its tainted history, and the occasionally suggested entirely new spirituality that would replace it), he says: “The easy answer is that one stream should supersede the other, but that is precisely the kind of Western dualistic thinking that has led us to this crisis point in our evolution.” (256) I think a few of the statements made about Christianity succumb to this “easy answer”. Others, including yourself, do not make that mistake, for in your Introduction you ask: Are there elements in our longer tradition that can inspire us in making right our relationships with Indigenous peoples and our earth?”(14)

Mary Betz journeys through Judeo-Christian history to “uncover forgotten inspiration” that could help us put matters right, and she does it well. For my part, I think your question points to the very core of Christian faith, namely incarnation. This is the ultimate reason why Christians needed, and still need, to listen to the various first peoples, as your title so aptly suggests. It is also the reason why failure to listen meant, and still means, failing the Christian faith itself.

Some of the following observations might seem minor given the great value of this book. My reservations about some of Helen Bergin’s statements are probably linguistic rather than substantial. Her reference to “three entities” (241) says what she herself does not intend to say. And I don’t agree that it is helpful to regard the Holy Spirit as a “divine social presence” rather than a ... divine person,” (245) – or rather, that these have to be either/or.

I take your point that the Maori term “utu” means balance, and not merely revenge. But it does include tit for tat violence. And what’s wrong with first-hand experience, even if it is 19th century, (e.g. the Protestant missionary Riemenschneider) who records that the appeal of the Gospel to some Maori was that it gave them a let-out from being bound by utu?

I would like to see further development of the proposals of the independent Working Group cited by Jen Margaret, where she argues for “the independent exercise of rangatiratanga (where Maori would make decisions for Maori) and kawanatanga (where the Crown would make decisions for “its people” - that phrase would need clarifying), and a “relational sphere” where the two would work together. (279).

Susan, for what they are worth, these are the comments of one who has not thought as much about this subject as you have, and therefore they are offered with some humility. And you can be assured they come out of my true appreciation of your book which deserves wide attention. I have recommended to Brendan Ward that you and Peter McDermott would have much to offer the seminarians.

Whakapaingia

