

Religion and New Zealand Society

THERE is a great deal of mapping to do in order to establish the major trends and landmarks in the history of religion in New Zealand. In the absence of outstanding books like P. O'Farrell's *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia* (1977), much of what is said in this article must remain somewhat impressionistic. It is therefore especially important to clarify some of the basic questions about kinds of material that would be relevant, as well as the appropriate questions to ask. Insofar as these depend on overseas research, they may not be entirely appropriate, but at least they may provide a useful starting point for discussion and an attempt to break out of some of the rather limited models of writing religious history which have so far been used.

The scope of historical examination of the relation between religion and society in New Zealand depends on the model of 'religion' adopted. Most of the books, booklets, articles and theses so far produced have not seen this as an issue worth clarifying. Authors have almost invariably identified 'religion' with the various Christian denominations, the frameworks of meaning and the institutions created by their members. Writing religious history within this framework has considerable justification, for it reflects the social as well as the religious dominance of these groups within major segments of New Zealand society. The churches have profoundly influenced local and national perceptions of religion and its role. Exploration of their functions and diversity is a fundamental part of the history of New Zealand religion, though as yet no works exist which are even remotely comparable to S. Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People* (1973) or R.T. Handy, *History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (1977). Both these books skilfully explore relations between society and churches in historical perspective, and are based on a solid body of research. Such research has hardly been begun here.

Even the denominational histories which have so far appeared in New Zealand lack the historical maturity, depth and range of analysis which mark some of their American or British counterparts. So far the great majority of national, regional or local church histories have been written by people without advanced historical training or developed ideas of the possibilities of their writing. The results tell us some significant things

about popular views of religious history and the task of the historian. They have concentrated with almost fervent unanimity on the provision of buildings, the establishment and development of parishes and congregations, the clergy and the churches' organizations. They seek to chronicle, edify, and even inspire. Leaders are important, but little attention has been paid to the context in which these developments took place. Buildings and institutions in a pioneer society are very important signs of community identity, a reassuring sign that a community is both established and civilized enough to want the landmarks of the home countries. Local body histories make it very clear that this kind of investment led to bitter disputes between communities and to personal rivalries of formidable dimensions. If the historians of churches are to be believed, divisions over roads, railways and bridges, catalysed far more passion than the road to salvation, the building of halls and churches, or attempts at religious bridge building. Either a miraculous transformation occurred when fractious colonists engaged in religious activities, or historians have discreetly omitted conflicts, because they deemed these inappropriate to the progress of true religion and the unity it was believed to bring.

Indeed this model of unity may have played a more formative role than suspected in shaping the 'myth' of uniformity, which historians and commentators have often noted as a feature of New Zealand society. Certainly, a desire to stress unity appears to have restrained historians from exploration of the varieties of belief and practice within denominations, which reflect surprisingly persistent regional and party variants from Britain. Focussing attention on buildings, leaders and official statements, without much attention to their background, has obscured the different layers of belief and action, particularly among the churches' members and adherents, whose role has been seriously under-estimated in many histories.

In part, this reflects the heavy dominance of political history and the comparatively recent academic arrival of psychology and sociology in New Zealand universities. The absence of any regular and systematic mapping of the contours of religious belief and practice, comparable to the work of Mol in Australia or Greeley in the United States, let alone more sophisticated studies, is also due to a certain conviction among academics that religion is socially irrelevant.¹ Even the fairly crude data supplied by censuses, with their fascinating evidence of important regional variations in religious allegiance, have attracted very little analytical attention comparable to work being done on social mobility, by historians using the techniques of the social sciences. There is a wealth of data about individuals in baptismal and marriage registers, which British and European historians are utilizing very skilfully to illuminate

¹ See for example, N.W.H. Blaikie, 'An analysis of religious affiliations', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1968; H. Mol, *Religion in Australia*, Melbourne, 1970; A. Greeley, *The American Catholic*, New York, 1977.

many aspects of demographic patterns and social behaviour. Though the time scale in New Zealand is much shorter, there are some interesting possibilities for testing overseas research methods and findings here, which have so far been under-utilized. Though denominational methods for collecting statistics vary widely, and have changed considerably over the years, research into patterns of growth and changes in religious allegiance along the lines utilized by A.D. Gilbert and others shows the value of long-range statistical studies, when they are intelligently related to other source materials and interpretative frameworks.²

That such questions are only beginning to be explored is partly due to the small size of the community of professional historians in New Zealand and the heavy demands of teaching non-New Zealand history. More subtle issues are involved, such as the search for New Zealand identity, with the tendency to focus on what fosters national and local unity, rather than exploring what is or was perceived to be different. Belief that there ought to be a unified pattern of behaviour in religion and morality has only been showing signs of erosion since the 1960s, with the gradual but reluctant recognition that a 'multi-cultural' framework may be a better national goal than the earlier model of integration. That attitude, together with a narrowly focussed version of what is normative Christianity, has, for example, led to a very obvious neglect of the history of Maori Christianity compared with the dominant Pakeha norms, though some historians have recently been offering a very different framework of interpretation.³

An even more interesting historiographical question is the reason for the blandness and flatness of many New Zealand church histories. By comparison with Biblical histories, the published histories of New Zealand denominations and parishes show little interest in the struggles between sin and grace in individuals and communities. The story of redemption is taken for granted and remains largely untraced in our national or local context, despite the overseas vitality of a Christian view of history which seeks to relate human endeavour to God's sovereign purposes. New Zealand poets and novelists have been left to explore some of the complexities and paradoxes of our nation's behaviour, though even there something of the same limited vision and secular flatness is very obvious, when local writing is compared with the interest in religious themes and the complexity of human nature which has so often characterized European or American literature.

This raises the fundamental issue; how ought a historian define religion? Clearly, a denominational model is too narrow. Even if we are reluctant to adopt the definition of Durkheim, or Tillich's view of religion as ultimate concern, recent American studies of civil religion show quite conclusively how illuminating for historians a wide definition of religion, which examines community attitudes as well as churches, can

2 A.D. Gilbert, *Religion in Industrial Society*, London, 1976.

3 L. Hamilton, 'Christianity among the Maori', Ph.D. thesis, Otago University, 1970.

be.⁴ If some sociologists are right when they interpret religion as a reflection of social realities, however much its institutional and ideological forms may change, there is a fruitful area for co-operation between historians and social scientists in describing the dynamics of our society, the nature of its civil religion and sense of what is sacred. If the social role of religion has been weaker here than in Britain, because of the effects of creating a new society, the historian may need to explore the influence of colonial society on churches as a dominant reason for the nature of New Zealand religion.

In an illuminating article on the writing of Australian religious history, O'Farrell suggests that much Australian history can be seen as the search for substitutes for positive religious forces which have largely been absent.⁵ If this approach can also be applied to New Zealand with recognition of religion's comparatively weak cultural role, remedying the gaps in the historical examination of religion may also involve some re-orientation of the academic training given in History Departments. Historical perceptions are deeply shaped by cultural environment, and a materialistic community may not be the most promising soil for the historical study of religious groups which profess to live in the realm of the spirit, especially when their local representatives appear to be of marginal political and intellectual importance compared with European and British Christianity or Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Two other issues relating to historical method can also shape the range of evidence the would-be historian of New Zealand religion wishes to use. Should religious history be written within the framework of national history (a method which assumes that this was the most formative factor) or as an extension of the histories of British churches? A cursory survey of nineteenth-century New Zealand religious periodicals shows how heavily dominated they were by British concerns. Such intellectual vitality as there was in churches here owed its inspiration to British books and teachers. For all the vigour of controversies over worship and doctrine reflected in our newspapers, they were essentially provincial echoes of disputes that had their origins in Europe and Britain. One of the few exceptions was discussion of the Constitution of the Church of the Province of New Zealand which showed clear signs of original thinking to suit the new ecclesiastical situation here. For the study of Roman Catholics, awareness of international factors is even more important, as the context for any local initiatives, than it is for other denominations.

The second factor is exploration and assessment of the effects of absence of an established church or churches, which fostered a good deal of local and interdenominational co-operation that broke down traditional religious barriers, long before it seemed either desirable or

4 R.E. Richey and D.G. Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, New York, 1974.

5 P. O'Farrell, 'Writing the General History of Australian Religion', *Journal of Religious History*, IX, 1 (1976).

necessary in Britain. Attention needs to be paid to the emergence of churches as voluntary societies and the development of a 'Christian' identity which was defined in lay and moral terms rather than in clerical and sacred terms. While official relationships between churches were fairly minimal till after 1945, there has been a degree of co-operation in worship and witness which has deeply influenced (and perhaps reflected) lay opinion on the nature of the church and doctrinal shibboleths. Indeed a virgin territory for research exists, so far as the extent to which Protestant churches have influenced one another since the colonial period and contributed to the emergence of a folk Christianity on which institutional and denominational allegiance sits lightly but which takes moral commitment very seriously. A study of the career of Bishop Selwyn shows dramatically how the colonial and missionary environment modified his High Church views and enabled him to work with others to a degree English bishops would have found impossible and intolerable.

Selwyn was perceptive enough to see that the infant Church of the Province needed a voluntary compact as the basis for its constitution and a quite different ethos as a consequence, which enhanced the spiritual authority of the episcopate as well as giving a dramatically enlarged share of responsibility to the laity.⁶ Despite this, some members of established churches in Britain found the adjustment required by the colonies too great. A significant group of clergy returned to Britain. From those who remained, major changes in outlook were required. Finance had to be raised by subscription and voluntary giving, and there was little of the framework of coercion and discrimination against dissenters which clergy of the established churches used unhesitatingly in Britain. Assured social recognition and status did not exist, for many settlers had come to New Zealand to escape the control of squire and parson. Instead of being part of the establishment, church people found themselves as partners with other denominations which they had formerly treated with contempt or been able to ignore. Struggling for survival in an environment which was frequently unreceptive to matters of the spirit, and having to live alongside those of different religious allegiance, were a sore trial to many who had unhesitatingly identified the true church with their own sect. By the end of the nineteenth century, religious exclusivism was seriously weakened and inter-denominational movement was already considerable among church members and adherents. Occasionally, churches were built, as at Whitianga, which were for the use of all Protestant denominations.

If the public role of the free churches without coercive authority was not a hard enough lesson to learn, the painful efforts of the churches to provide schools in support of their community role were taken from

⁶ Selwyn to Coleridge, 27 July 1842, G.A. Selwyn, 'Letters', Alexander Turnbull Library, q MS Sel 33167, pp.36-39; G.A. Selwyn, *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a Strange Land*, Exeter, 1842, p.14.

them by the Education Act of 1877.⁷ Church schools were a major agency for inculcating both a Christian and denominational ethos in a group far wider than the offspring of committed members, as well as providing social control and the entrance to the privileges of higher education. Once again the establishment of a free, compulsory and secular primary education system reinforced the tendency of Protestants to see churches as voluntary associations with no intrinsic authority or coercive power save appeal to individual conscience. There seemed no reason to join Catholics in establishing a separate school system. Traditional religious allegiance sat much more loosely on migrants and there is some evidence for significant migration to New Zealand from English parishes where there was overt repudiation of the Church of England. The emergence of churches as voluntary societies is seen by sociologists of religion as one of the most important consequences of secularization this century.⁸ It was already well underway early in New Zealand's history, making it exceedingly important to assess historically the religious practice and presumptions of ordinary people, as distinct from those of articulate and powerful ecclesiastics.

Though a rather narrow and official definition of religion has meant that official national and diocesan church records of a restricted kind are fairly complete, there are many gaps in regional and local 'archives', if such a term can be accurately applied to the many haphazard and ill-organized repositories where such records are kept. Complete runs of official and committee correspondence are rare and too little effort has been made to collect personal letters and diaries which bring to life the religious commitments of clergy or of ordinary people, within the churches or outside them. While the environment of faith and practice in Anglican and Roman Catholic churches can be fairly readily assessed by reference to liturgies and hymnaries, prayers and sermons have rarely survived in the non-liturgical churches, apart from newspaper references. Historians consequently find it much more difficult to assess the comparative influence of explicit teaching compared with implicit tradition in shaping popular beliefs among Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and sectarian groups.

Though these considerations may seem somewhat esoteric, they can have considerable effect on the kind of religious history written. An example of this is the changing approach to religion among the Maori. Babbage and Greenwood attempted to interpret variants in Maori religion within the framework of Christian orthodoxy in belief and practice, and with no serious attempt to place the Hauhau and Ringatu movements in a wider historical context, or to utilize the work of social scientists. Henderson's study of Ratana is more sympathetic, but still

7 I. Breward, *Godless Schools?*, Christchurch, 1967; J. Mackey, *The Making of a State Education System*, London, 1967.

8 B. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, Oxford, 1976.

fails to see parallels with independent churches in Africa.⁹ Not until P. Clark's *Hauhau* (1975) was there a study of Maori religion which draws on the social sciences and studies of similar movements overseas, and attempts to see how the movement can be understood within its own terms, instead of a pre-conceived framework. Far from being evidence of the pathetic and naive reactions of a conquered race, such adjustment cults are important evidence of Maori cultural resilience, religious vitality and creativity outside normative Christian frameworks, where the non-emergence of an indigenous and expansionist Christianity comparable to that in Samoa, Tonga, Hawaii and the Cook Islands is a historical puzzle.

Research into the religion of Pacific Island migrants to New Zealand has shown how the Church has assumed an even wider range of functions here than in the islands, because the Church here has become the dominant repository of cultural values. Samoan migrants, in particular, have recreated their distinctive forms of Christianity, despite the problems created by migration and the Church's becoming much more a voluntary association, than providing the sacred environment for every activity and the sanction for morality. Though the role of pastors is enormously important, migration has enhanced the role of lay people outside the chiefly classes. In Tokoroa, for example, Nokise has shown how the activities of a remarkable group of lay people led to the emergence of one of the strongest Pacific Island congregations in New Zealand.¹⁰ Study of religious activity among other migrant groups like Scandinavian and German Lutheran or Gereformeerde Dutch settlers suggests that there is a critical membership and community size for religious survival in New Zealand, as well as distinctive features about society here which make religious patterns rather different from those in the United States. The Associated Churches of Christ (apart from Nelson), the Baptists and the Methodists have not assumed here the expansionist role so obvious in the United States. Nor apart from Ringatu and Ratana have there been any indigenous religious movements comparable to the American Disciples of Christ, the Mormons or non-denominational evangelical Christianity. Research on this might indicate some distinctive features of New Zealand as a migrant society.

Consequently, study of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Methodist churches, who between them dominate New Zealand Christianity, is especially important for the history of religion here. Their influence has been most pervasive in rural areas, small towns, provincial cities. They provided a range of service, sporting and cultural activities,

9 S.B. Babbage, *Hauhauism*, Wellington, 1937; W.S. Greenwood, *The Upraised Hand*, Wellington, 1942; J. Henderson, *Ratana*, 2nd ed., Wellington, 1972; H.W. Turner, *African Independent Church*, Oxford, 1967; T.O. Ranger and J. Waller, eds, *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*, London, 1975.

10 U.F. Nokise, 'History of the Pacific Islanders Congregational Church', M.Th. thesis, University of Otago, 1978; D.C. Pitt and C. MacPherson, *Emerging Pluralism*, Auckland, 1976.

described in Somerset's study of Littledene, as well as frequently influencing local body by-laws in a striking way, both explicitly and through the roles played by their leading members in local government.¹¹

Nationally, the major churches' history has serious gaps. The histories of Methodism produced for the 150th anniversary were a series of lost opportunities and Morrell's fine study of the Anglican Church said tantalizingly little on the laity, relations with the New Zealand community or doctrinal and liturgical developments.¹² Significant changes in the government, worship, doctrine and pastoral ideals within the parent British churches need to be assessed in relation to developments in New Zealand. Amidst much that was simply imitative and adaptive, in lay involvement, government, education, worship, social ethics, reunion, New Zealand Christians often were in advance of their parent churches. If this had happened in just one or two areas, then changes could be simply accidental, but because they were so pervasive and have continued, a deeper historical explanation is necessary. A colonial society sits more lightly on traditional patterns and has a willingness to experiment without being paralysed by possible consequences. This kind of evidence suggests that there are some distinctive features in New Zealand religion, which are interwoven with social and class structure and the historical dynamics of a colonial and provincial society, where migration led to the loss of important cultural inhibitions. Concern for equality expressed in the ordination of women to the ministry, impatience with traditional religious barriers found in the Bible Class movements and multitudinous examples of local co-operation before national leadership had moved, a deep concern for service expressed in the proportion of people involved in professional Christian employment, the more humble social origins of the clergy than in Britain, the political conservatism of many Christians without the leaven of radicalism which has characterized British Christianity, these are clues to forces which need analysis and assessment.

These comments could be taken to suggest that the study of religion is basically the study of society. There is clearly much of value in the approach suggested by a scholar like Obelkevich. Even if historians went no further than the method he suggests, there are many fruitful avenues for exploration of folk religion, the social role of religion and its intimate relation to change and class structures.

In the search for the social meaning of religion I have assumed with Feuerbach, that the secret of theology is anthropology, and, by extension, that the secret of religious history is social history. Yet religion at the same time casts its own unique light on society. In the nineteenth century, at any rate, when secular modes of expression were scarce (or left few records) the concern and aspirations both of individuals and groups could express themselves — indirectly or

11 H.D.C. Somerset, *Littledene*, Wellington, 1938, revised edition, 1974.

12 E.W. Hames, *Out of the Common Way*, Auckland, 1972; *Coming of Age*, Auckland, 1974; W.P. Morrell, *The Anglican Church in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1972.

symbolically if necessary — in religion as nowhere else. Religion thus offers a privileged access to values and assumptions that otherwise might have remained unarticulated or invisible.¹³

Whether there is a transcendent reality which is not readily accessible to the methods of the historian and social scientist, but which nevertheless must be taken into account as a system of belief when religious history is written, is an issue more likely to be determined by our affections rather than our reason. One way of exploring the ways in which beliefs and behaviour, or time and eternity, are believed to intersect is through biography. Biographies of New Zealand religious leaders are uncommon and often have the cloying feel of poor hagiography, without the redeeming interest of miracles, or strenuous struggles with temptations and the demonic, let alone some of the vigour and incisiveness of Biblical biography. The suppressive instincts of the edifying biographer too often end up by depriving the subject of any real humanity or personal development. The portraits are one-dimensional and make it difficult to believe that people could really have been like that. The biographies of Kendall by Judith Binney and Sir Walter Nash by Keith Sinclair, in contrast, show the possibilities of relating personal faith and environment and so exploring some of the dimensions of freedom and sin, in the kind of depth which can characterize the best novels and plays.¹⁴ That kind of biographical art which draws not only on historical disciplines, but also on the social sciences needs to be applied to a number of New Zealand religious leaders.

Bishop Selwyn, for example, needs an adequate modern biography which explores his very complex personality, more fully and sensitively than was possible for his nineteenth-century biographers, Tucker and Curteis.¹⁵ They rightly emphasized his stature, both in the minuscule Church of the Province and in the Church of England nationally and internationally when he returned to Lichfield. What they do not make clear is the extent to which Selwyn developed as a person and a Christian during the course of his long career, or the struggles that lay behind his notable achievements. His strenuous and muscular Christianity, which became something of a legend, may have been won at a higher personal cost than is generally recognized, and needs to be seen against the background of his mother's severe depression and his father's ill health. The very strength of Selwyn's self-discipline suggests a person living like a tightly wound spring, which could release unpredictably in outbursts of rage against subordinates who failed to measure up to his high standards.¹⁶

13 J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, Oxford, 1977, p.ix.

14 J. Binney, *Legacy of Guilt*, Auckland, 1968; K. Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, Auckland, 1976.

15 W.H. Tucker, *The Life and Episcopate of G.A. Selwyn*, London, 1881; G. Curteis, *Bishop Selwyn*, London, 1889.

16 J. Greenwood, 'Diary', 1850-52, Alexander Turnbull Library, pp.29-30, 81.

Indeed, he may well have set ministerial and academic standards too high for English aspirants as well as for potential Maori and Melanesian clergy, with the result that the growth of discipleship was rather slower than he had hoped. Despite his formidable linguistic gifts and knowledge of the cultures of his converts, he did not always appreciate the formidable cultural barriers which Polynesians and Melanesians needed to pass through in order to become Christian. His leadership gifts, physical toughness and bravery were undoubtedly important in providing potential converts with a model of masculine and chiefly behaviour, but could at times make him appear an unbending and autocratic aristocrat who was acutely conscious of the difference between a gentleman and a commoner. Despite his mistreatment of Henry Williams, he did ultimately unbend and admit his error of judgement. As a man under divine authority himself, he measured himself daily by Christ's standards and had an unaffectedly simple Biblical and Prayerbook piety which could profoundly move individuals and congregations by its authoritative summons to similar obedience.¹⁷

Though this could reveal a steely determination to uphold the truth as he saw it, or the status of his episcopal office against the CMS, he displayed a humility and modesty in his personal dealings with high and low which was positively unique among the nineteenth-century Anglican episcopate. When insultingly told by a hostile Maori community to go and sleep in the pigsty, he did just that and shamed his hosts by his complete willingness to accept their breach of hospitality. Most of his episcopal colleagues had undoubted ability to put others down, but Selwyn managed to retain and develop a common touch in unassuming meeting of lords and bargees alike in his Lichfield period. Most bishops were imprisoned by their office. There is a great deal of evidence that Selwyn was not, because he continued to grow in Christian virtues. Whether that was because he was an exceptional person or an unusual Christian needs to be carefully discussed by a biographer, because Selwyn's writings make it plain that religious faith was an integral part of his self-perception, just as the letters of associates like Abraham make plain the religious dimension of the hero-worship he inspired in them.¹⁸

These examples indicate that much research remains to be done before it could be said that the writing of religious history in New Zealand comes of age, despite the modest growth of research and even synthesis. Clarification of assumptions, willingness to look beyond some of the inherited boundaries and a critical testing of the theses of overseas historians can make an important contribution to the vitality of historical studies here. Religious history touches some of the most important dimensions of human experience and brings the historians close to creative springs of insight which make history at its best an art

¹⁷ *Proceedings of General Synod*, 1865, p.34; Curteis, p.288.

¹⁸ Abraham to Coleridge, 13 August 1850; G.A. Selwyn 'Letters', Alexander Turnbull Library, q MS Sel 33167, p.721.

form, as well as involving the patient collection and analysis of facts and dates. Both dimensions are needed if history is to flourish.

IAN BREWARD

Knox College, Dunedin

MAORI ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS
The Genesis of Some Pakeha Myths and Legends

M.P.K. SORRENSON

Since Europeans first set foot in New Zealand they have speculated about where the Maori people came from, how they made their way to New Zealand, and how they lived when they arrived here. Traced back to their authors, as Professor Sorrenson does in these 1978 MacMillan Brown Lectures, the speculations reveal layers of intellectual fashion. The result has been an accumulation of Pakeha myths about Maori origins. The process of this myth-making is Professor Sorrenson's subject; he is not concerned to add to it.

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