

A PĀKEHĀ WHAKAPAPA DEFICIT AND A DIALOGUE WITH SCIENCE AS WHAKAPAPA OF THE MIND

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Abstract

This paper examines the deep sense of whakapapa or genealogy that frames much of the contemporary public dialogue in Aotearoa.¹ Te ao Māori (Māori worldview) preserves at the heart of its Mātauranga (knowledge system) concepts that ground morality and purpose in the land/whenua and people/tangata, in spirit/wairua and mauri/life force, and especially in whakapapa or lineage and family/whanau. I examine the sense of a whakapapa deficit that one can experience as a pākehā in New Zealand, and how this is felt as a spiritual lack. I then reflect on the fact that, as Alasdair Macintyre has argued, people are grounded not only by land and spirit but also by a series of stories or interlocking narratives *and* embodied practices. I put the intellectual story idea into dialogue with the understanding of whakapapa in Mātauranga Māori in my own history, exploring the connection of science and theology, as an example of trying to do a whakapapa of the mind. I end with the possibility of connection and community in Christ, overcoming our various alienations, deprivations, and oppressions. oppressions

Keywords

Whakapapa, te ao Māori, Pākehā, land/whenua, intellectual whakapapa, wairua/spirit, autoethnography, Mātauranga Māori

This paper examines the deep sense of whakapapa or genealogy (of people but also ideas) that frames much of the contemporary public dialogue in Aotearoa. Te ao Māori (Māori worldview) preserves at the heart of its Mātauranga (knowledge system) concepts that ground morality and purpose in the land/whenua and people/tangata, in spirit/wairua and mauri/life force, and especially in whakapapa or lineage and whanau. As a Pākehā New Zealander, one can often feel as though one has no whakapapa, and to have no whakapapa is also a spiritual lack. I investigate that

1 An earlier version of this paper was given at the 2024 ANZATS Conference in Adelaide, July 2024. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for their helpful suggestions and attention to detail.

lack, interacting primarily with a thesis by Esther Fitzpatrick and others who have researched this Pākehā identity, and by giving brief stretches of personal reflection.

In the second part of the paper, I reflect on the fact that, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, people are grounded not only by land and spirit, but also by a series of stories or interlocking narratives *and* embodied practices. And this is true even when we have been formed by a culture that claims to ascribe only to a more mechanical Enlightenment project that sits above particular cultures and historical particularities. Humans are all “storytelling animals,” says MacIntyre.² In this paper, I put the intellectual story idea into dialogue with my understanding of whakapapa in Mātauranga Māori, drawing on my own history, as an example of trying to do a whakapapa of the mind.

This is not a paper trying to contribute in any way to Mātauranga Māori; rather, it is a theological reflection on whakapapa, as a person of European lineage living in a culture increasingly framed by Māori language and culture. Mātauranga Māori and the discourse around it are more often than not the context in which contemporary theology is done. Very often, this means making some contribution to the decolonising of theology. And this is an ongoing task. But when two cultures meet there are reciprocal effects. Pākehā culture has never continued as though it were untouched by te ao Māori. In that spirit, I offer this reflection on whakapapa as a European New Zealander born and living in this culture with at least five generations on my father’s side.

Mātauranga Māori

Mātauranga Māori is a contemporary name for all that falls under the heading of Māori ways of knowing, including education, environmental knowledge, knowledge of spirits and ancestors, cultural practices and customs, navigation, healing, knowledge of plants and animals, astronomy, as well as hidden knowledge and practices now known only to a few. It is closely linked to the term whakapapa, which is used to explain not only genealogical lineages but also taxonomies and classification of plants and animals in an ecological and cosmic context.³ Whakapapa is, as Mere Roberts and Peter Wills say, “to place in layers, one upon another.”⁴

Mātauranga Māori is not disciplinary and therefore connects branches of knowledge in a way that is more holistic than a Western knowledge base. It covers knowledge that is no longer included in a science curriculum like healing properties

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

3 See <https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/concepts/Māramatanga-Māori>.

4 Roma Mere Roberts and Peter Wills, “Understanding Māori Epistemology: A Scientific Perspective,” in *Tribal Epistemologies: Essays in the Philosophy of Anthropology*, ed. Helmut Wautischer (Ashgate, 1998), 43–71.

of plants, but also the ways in which wairua/spirit is incorporated into and used in a much broader worldview than Europeans normally work within. It allows links to be made between evolution and whakapapa, which locates a Western theory like evolution in a more traditional and Indigenous framework.

A lively discussion has arisen in New Zealand around Mātauranga Māori and science prompted by plans to introduce Mātauranga Māori into the high school and university science curriculum. This has produced a diversity of viewpoints. At one end of the reaction, some scientists (all but one male, and in the upper echelons of science departments) penned a letter to the *Listener* arguing that impersonal evidence-based double-blind trials have had enormous power and anything that threatens to compromise pure scientific method is a travesty. Science, they say, is culturally neutral and has nothing to do with Western thinking, having its roots in Middle Eastern and Asian contexts.⁵ Somewhere in the middle are scientists who see the value of widening the scientific enterprise and incorporating these more ancient forms of science, as well as the idea of protoscience in the West. They are happy to have Mātauranga Māori embedded in the science curriculum. For others, Mātauranga is a deeper and wider/different way of knowing that extends to matters unreached by science but where the complete separation of science from Mātauranga Māori creates uneasiness and dissatisfaction from a New Zealand Treaty perspective. These Māori (like Ocean Mercier) argue that science needs to be decolonised first before a deeper appreciation of Mātauranga Māori can be had.⁶ Some think Mātauranga Māori should be included, but not under science.

The discourse around Mātauranga Māori, then, is everywhere in Aotearoa and is very much the context in which theology is done. And while Mātauranga Māori breaks open a space for Wairua/wairua in New Zealand society, it also raises issues and an awareness of a lack that might not be present in other countries, even ones that are bicultural or have large First Nations populations. One such sense of loss in non-Māori, or Pākehā, is whakapapa.

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- 5 Seven scientists and philosophers from the University of Auckland wrote a letter in 2021 to the national magazine, the *New Zealand Listener*, arguing that Mātauranga Māori should not be incorporated into the science curriculum and that science was in fact universal, not imperialistic, as many postcolonial advocates have argued. “In Defense of Science,” *New Zealand Listener*, July 31, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20230610052444/https://www.fsu.nz/in_defence_of_science_article. For more information on the surrounding controversy, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Listener_letter_on_science. This created a storm, with the Royal Society of New Zealand and the University’s Vice Chancellor entering into the fray with more moderate, albeit controversial, stands. The dialogue continues.
- 6 This discussion is elucidated in this RNZ article: Mani Dunlop, “University Academics’ Claim Mātauranga Māori ‘Not Science’ Sparks Controversy,” *RNZ*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/447898/university-academics-claim-matauranga-maori-not-science-sparks-controversy>.

Whakapapa

In Aotearoa now, as opposed to a generation ago, there is an intense scrutiny of ethnic identity, and in a way that I have not encountered elsewhere except in the United States, where the history is very different.⁷ That means scrutiny of what it means to be Māori and what it means to be Pākehā. The conversation is fluid, at times painful, and emotionally highly charged. One of the key signatures in this discussion is whakapapa.

Interestingly, to be Māori is, first of all, to have some verifiable lineage to at least one ancestor, however distant. Being schooled in the culture, learning the language, and connecting with one's own marae or iwi (tribe), then deepens the cultural authenticity. To be Pākehā, or non-Māori is to be defined, very much in relationship to Māori. Pākehā is the word used by Māori for non-Māori.⁸ This can be difficult to navigate. Pākehā are all different. Non-Māori are diversely gendered. We are by at least some accounts, Asians, South Africans, Americans, Europeans, and people from the British Isles. If we are all lumped into one group, it can feel as though there is no Pākehā culture that matters. And indeed, Pākehā are sometimes seen as the group without a culture, but holding the position of norm—New Zealanders, against which everything else is measured.

In recent years there has been a rush of papers and books on being Pākehā. One of these is Esther Fitzpatrick's brilliant thesis, *The Art of Letting the Ghost Come Back: A Serendipitous Tale of Exploring the Complex Issue of Becoming a Pākehā Educator*. Here she interacts with her own story, especially touchstone stories and any number of interlocutors to interrogate her own history and identity as a Pākehā.⁹ She also uses Derrida's idea of speaking back to ancestors as ghosts—hauntology—to creatively bring these ancestors into her whakapapa, which for her came from numerous countries but included prominently Sephardic Jewish heritage.¹⁰ Her advisors and sources all persuade her that she should know her colonial history, and

7 In the US there has historically been a stigma and deprivation associated with being black or Indigenous that has never gone completely and has certainly not been overturned. Blacks did a great deal to "pass" as white if they could. And the smallest amount of African blood would define the person as black, or could be held against you. In the US the conversation around Indigenous First Nations people is burgeoning but has taken longer to emerge.

8 Pākehā is a more neutral term. Another is tauiwi, emphasising the strangeness of non-Māori people. Another term used by Māori and non-Māori is tangata tiriti (people of the treaty), referring to the Treaty of Waitangi signed between representatives of the British Crown and Māori Chiefs in 1840.

9 Esther Fitzpatrick, *The Art of Letting the Ghost Come Back: A Serendipitous Tale of Exploring the Complex Issue of Becoming a Pākehā Educator* (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2016). Earlier studies include Michael King, *Pakeha: The Quest for Identity in New Zealand* (Penguin, 1991); *Being Pākehā Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native* (Penguin, 1999); *The Silence Beyond: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 2011).

10 Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 118.

critically incorporate it into some sort of Pākehā whakapapa.

Esther, although she came from a family with Jewish/Spanish/Scottish heritage, grew up on and off the local Māori marae and in the end, she manages to weave her identities together as a Pākehā with her Māori guides and fellow travellers. She also sees her role as an educator as helping students to interrogate their own history in the land, inspired, as it were, by the Māori model of whakapapa. One way or another, then, this conversation has become polyphonic and complicated for all Pākehā who are writing in the public sphere, working in professional jobs, acting as public servants, or are elected officials.

As well as Esther's thesis, I interact here with Sarah Penwarden's *Being and Becoming Pākehā: Unfolding the Places of Colonisation Behind My Pepeha*.¹¹ Sarah grew up in Taranaki, and she speaks of her family history having folds that need interrogating. In several of these, she discovers disturbing settler history. She speaks of folds rather than layers because with layers we can just assume the past has been covered over. With folds we acknowledge that the disturbance may still resonate in the present, as indeed New Zealand's volcanic geological features continue to do.¹²

These echoes are in the background of this paper, delineating the complex space in which we think about identity in Aotearoa. In this first section of the paper, I reflect on a *lack* that appears as we engage in this process, at least for some of us. The closer I get to Māori the clearer it is that as a Pākehā with no racial links to Māori in a rapidly changing Aotearoa New Zealand society, I have no whakapapa to speak of, certainly not to a group of people with stable links to the land, aware of their collective history, and their connections to one another. For this reason, the connection to land for Pākehā is increasingly fraught. Instead of what might once have been felt as a simple connection to "nature," a sense of alienation can creep in as all land is now understood as tribally connected, contested, or at the very least associated with ongoing political and legal discourse. But the question keeps coming up, and even if one was to find a genetic history, even if one were to interrogate one's colonial history, as Esther and Sarah have done, rarely does it give a sense of belonging as it does to Māori. These details sometimes do give occasion for critical reflection and repentance but much more rarely for inclusion and support. This paper will necessarily then include personal reflections.

Examining My History and Ancestors

Thesis writer Esther's partly Jewish colonial heritage includes growing up going on and off a local marae in Ōpōtiki and her struggles with her diverse heritage and

11 Sarah Penwarden, "Being and Becoming Pākehā: Unfolding the Places of Colonisation Behind My Pepeha," *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* 43, no. 1 (2023): 23–40.

12 Penwarden, "Being and Becoming Pākehā," 26.

Māori exposure.¹³ The early contact with te ao Māori encouraged the dissertation exercise in identity discovery. By comparison, after my initial early years in Taupō and Gisborne, my context was very urban and very white (apart from a thinner family connection to Samoa). People say well, of course, you have a whakapapa, Nicola. They mean a genealogy. But there is a difference between history and a whakapapa. For instance, until recently, I have never reflected on how my ancestors came on waka/boats, in a way as Polynesians did, though my forebears came alone or in small family groups. They came in order to leave the world of family connections and constraints behind, to forget hardship, famine, class distinctions, or disappointment, returning only to fight reluctantly in foreign wars.

They settled in different parts of the country. Their names mean very little to me because all the connecting strands are gone. They crisscrossed the country. They were restless and looking for freedom from old bondages, not looking back. They were postmasters, gold diggers, pharmacists, teachers, and farmers from the scant information I have.

While Esther's family were relieved to find the family rumour of Jewish heritage confirmed by Ancestry.com, my parents disliked family history intensely, which does not help with discovering one's whakapapa. This dislike was for several reasons. They had converted to Catholicism against the wishes of my maternal grandparents. My father had been inspired by his Catholic secondary school education, but his larger family was agnostic. My parents took this break and their decision-making seriously enough that they did not really want to contemplate the past. There was another reason—they were trained in science and taught science, and it was out of this sense of progressiveness in science that the past was thought to be less important. I suspect the other reason was that they had lived through the war as children, and they wanted to believe we now lived in an era where we might not have war again. I suspect they also feared the ghosts of the past.

I assume that my own family is typical in many ways of other Pākehā, perhaps not always with the Catholic and science threads thrown in. The thinness of the cultural story in which I lived is only heightened when living alongside another culture that is always talking about whānau and whakapapa. I assume the aversion to genealogy is not so common, though New Zealand historian Michael King outlines a very similar and forceful story of adamant rejection by his father of facts and stories he had unearthed in his family lineage.¹⁴

For a long while, while studying in the US and before returning to Aotearoa, I took some comfort from the stories of Abraham and Sarah, wandering far from their culture and their civilisation, talking to an unknown God, and by the sense of

13 Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 9.

14 Michael King, *Silence Beyond*, 43.

adoption that is so central to Christian faith. There was also always the realisation that immigrants and refugees are also always in this predicament, though often one in which there are more whānau and more whakapapa carried with them.

This complex interaction between Māori and Pākehā has also evolved in the last few decades. Where once Pākehā may have shown solidarity by learning the language and even becoming historians of Māori as King did, this is now a much more challenging role. Even the study of te Reo (Māori language) is sometimes contested for Pākehā; it is not our language, and we are taking up space a Māori could use. On the other side, a conservative government is now trying to downplay the rapid rise of te Reo in the public sphere, though the language has probably now saturated the culture and schools to the extent that there is no turning back.

Engaging the Haunting and the Ghosts

Taking up Derrida's idea of hauntology, as used by Esther Fitzpatrick, I appreciate the notion of engaging with the ghosts from our past. The ones my parents chose to ignore were indeed ghosts, and I was curious about them. One of these ghosts/ancestors arrived, barely out of his teens, around 1840, in a small boat from Sydney, which found itself grounded on the rocks of Mangōnui in the far north. His family originally hailed from Reading, but his departure had been from Antigua, following the British government's abolition of slavery. This ancestor eventually made his way to Wellington. We own prints of a Barraud painting depicting his house on the Terrace, from where you could throw stones into Wellington Harbour. He went on to become the Wellington postmaster.¹⁵

My father did not want to dig deeply into John Farr Hoggard's backstory or that of his brothers for good reasons. There is unease at the beginning of the journey, at the edges of the known whakapapa. I have many questions for John Farr Hoggard: Why New Zealand? What did he feel about the family coffee plantation in Antigua? What kind of plantation was it? Did he ever wish to go home? By all accounts, he thrived in the new colony, soon marrying in what is now Old St Paul's in Wellington and fathering ten children.

Since I was a small child, I have never felt completely at home in Aotearoa, partly because the question of identity and closeness to the land is so vexing. It sometimes feels like home. I understand its institutions and I love its bush and wilderness. But I also love the countryside of the British Isles. I was surprised by how deeply I first responded to the Hampshire countryside and to the built environment as well, as though I could sense it had been there for generations of my whānau. I have been surprised by the strength of the pull back to the land where I do not belong, but in the context of whakapapa, I am less surprised than I might be. I have always

15 See National Library entry, <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22352170>.

assumed some sort of genetic memory was involved, shorthand perhaps for some of the power of whakapapa. This, too, is a powerful evocation of how I have felt in that now far-distant land.

Esther also considers the challenging aspects of being Pākehā. To be Pākehā means being defined by another group. For Pākehā, it often feels like we lack a culture. It is difficult to separate the specifics from the broad idea of Pākehā. Pākehā can feel “naked.”¹⁶

In my long sojourn away from Aotearoa, I would return to find the Māori renaissance energising, as though the landscape itself had finally come to life. Yet, as a Pākehā woman attending every pōwhiri (ceremony marking the beginning of a new year or a conference where new members are welcomed onto the premises or marae), I always found myself in the back seat. I had no voice in that space. I struggled to reconcile this with my intensely feminist training and found only dissonance. Surely, I thought, that would change. That was twenty years ago. At that time, I was reading the *Singing Whakapapa* by New Zealand novelist C. K. Stead, which tells the story of a historian searching for his Pākehā whakapapa.¹⁷ I didn’t fully understand its significance then, but I knew it was important. I hadn’t realised that in the two decades since returning to New Zealand, a growing sense of absence in identity would emerge. What does one do with a lack of whakapapa? The Māori I’ve discussed this with say, “yes, it is hard to be a Pākehā in New Zealand.”

However, at the same time, one cannot linger in malaise, much as one might feel it. Fitzpatrick quotes J. Lawn who is critical of much literature about Pākehā, by Pākehā, such as Michael King’s edited book, *Pākehā: The Quest for Identity in New Zealand*. Lawn expresses unease over a “hegemonic group who ostensibly abject themselves to an idealised other, while diverting the terms of debate from material conditions of oppression to their own psychic malaise.”¹⁸

A Sense of Exile

Sometimes I go to the British Isles and feel a relief, a pause in the endless interrogation of what it means to be Pākehā, in general and in my own history. I no longer have to stumble over Māori words. And then I go to a conference or witness something that shows me I now think in a way that is half-Indigenous; I have left behind the European mindset. Māori has become a cultural fold, as Sarah Penwarden calls it, in my own sense of self or identity. Echoes of te ao Māori have inhabited my inner

16 Wells used this word to describe the feeling Pākehā felt in the seventies when the myth of the unity of peoples was removed and the Māori renaissance emerged. P. Wells, “A Song for Pākehā: Feeling Bad about the Past Is No Way to Deal with the Future,” *Metro Magazine* (April 2012), 102–3, in Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 81.

17 C. K. Stead, *The Singing Whakapapa* (Penguin, 1994).

18 J. Lawn, “Pākehā Bonding,” *Meanjin* 53 (1994): 295–304, in Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 83.

landscape.

As Esther quotes Wells as saying: “Where exactly do Pākehā belong? Do they belong at all? Or are we merely a kind of lost tribe, dwelling in someone else’s country on sufferance?”¹⁹ These questions are omnipresent. She quotes Turner saying, “Pākehā are in a place of internal exile.”²⁰ This constant introspective interrogation *can* make one feel like an exile at home. How does one patch together a whakapapa from all of that—a family lineage full of ghosts and intended interruptions to whakapapa, and disruptions caused by migration, travel, war, shame, and scientific and religious decision-making. For instance, learning te Reo Māori. In even the most friendly classrooms, there is hesitation over Pākehā presenting a pepeha, the statement of connection to people and places that is crucial to whakapapa. Europeans, however long they have been in Aotearoa, and however close they might feel to the landscape, should not claim a connection to a mountain or a river. Māori are not only entitled to do so; they should claim the mountain and river of their tribe or marae.²¹

If one approaches this with spiritual sensitivity, whatever the merits of the current situation, lacking a whakapapa in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand signifies spiritual deficiency. Theologically, this absence isn’t something derived directly from Christian faith or theological training; instead, it is discerned in a society where whakapapa is central to enduring Māori spirituality, both before and after Christianity. Whakapapa can also be seen to illuminate some areas of the biblical narrative overlooked in the West. If one looks closely, hints of whakapapa can be found throughout the Bible, in the genealogies and in the deep connection to the land and, indeed, the cosmos. It appears in Jesus’ interweaving of story and place and indirectly in the enduring draw that the Holy Land holds for all believers. And whakapapa is an invisible element in hermeneutics that is sensitive to recurring patterns and symbols. Nevertheless, whakapapa isn’t something I would know without living in New Zealand. But I do, and so the absence weighs heavily on me. What other avenues exist for recovering a whakapapa? Is it a futile task? Living in Aotearoa makes me acutely aware of this deficit. If I lived elsewhere, I could delve into genealogy, and undertake a few DNA tests and believe I understood. But I do not.

19 Wells, “Song for Pākehā,” 102, in Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 85.

20 S. Turner, “Colonialism Continued: Producing the Self for Export,” in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds. John Docker and Gerhard Fischer, 218–29 (University of New South Wales Press, 2000), 294; in Fitzpatrick, *Art of Letting*, 142.

21 This has changed over time. There is now more scrutiny over pepeha than there once was. At the same time, te Reo is now everywhere, and all New Zealanders should have some competency. We all also live in a society where at least one river, one forest, and, recently, a mountain have been granted the legal status of personhood. Pākehā have no choice but to enter these conflicted conversations.

Whakapapa of the Mind

A part of any whakapapa is not just land and people; it is also thought patterns and ideas, as even the Jewish people have discovered at various points in their journey when exiled from their land and without a temple. Torah matters, not just temple. Those of us who give papers at academic conferences do all have something. We connect to deep stories in the ongoing reflection on faith that stretches back to the first few centuries. History holds significant importance in theology, much more so than in philosophy or sociology, for example. We possess ancestors of the mind.

Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, argues that we are not invincible autonomous reasoning machines, but frail animals shaped by unfathomable traditions and that the world contains countless other traditions that may, for all we know, be more intelligent than our own.²² Morality is not just about land but also about mutual understanding that binds us to our communities. We are born, he says, into “an interlocking set of narratives,” which in their turn are embedded in collective life, particularly in “practices” such as farming, medicine, and architecture, or football, chess, painting, music, biology, and history.²³

That brings me, somewhat bereft, speaking back to hauntings and ghosts, to the second part of my paper. I have no choice but to go looking for the threads of whakapapa in my intellectual history and its associated practices. The second part of this paper is, necessarily, a personal journey, as is any whakapapa. It attempts to make sense of where I locate myself in my intellectual journey and also makes sense of my lifelong theological engagement with evolution.

There are strands that make sense of intellectual history and connect to touchstone stories. My Roman Catholic childhood was intense. I asked some priests once, after an ANZATS (Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools) conference, whether they had ever been afraid of hell. They said no they always thought hell was for other people. Another one said that it made you really “get” religion, meaning that the intensity afforded by the ever-present threat of damnation focussed the mind. I agreed with that. I really *got* religion.

And then I *got* evolution. I was eavesdropping one night on a program my parents were listening to on Teilhard de Chardin. Radio was still a thing. I was transfixed. This was my spiritual and intellectual awakening. And inconveniently, it was to both theology and evolution. It was inconvenient for two reasons. Firstly, because there was little place to be a female theologian, and in any case, I wasn’t sure I believed in God. And secondly, because this obsession with evolution has never helped in most theological contexts. Apart from Teilhard, of course, I could see that evolution

22 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court, 1999).

23 MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 218.

provided a huge rupture in the collective discourse around origins, morality, and the Christian story because not only did it call into question a literal understanding of Genesis, but it also broke the ancient connection between the natural world and human morality and purpose.²⁴

This rupture is something I have spent my academic life trying to understand. Teilhard de Chardin was an isolated French Jesuit working in China as a palaeontologist under a Vatican ban. His work burst onto the theological scene only after his death in 1955. His vision was lyrical, prayerlike, a deep meditation on evolution as moving toward an omega point in Christ. He spoke of the noosphere and the biosphere. He wrote *Le Milieu Divin* and the *Phenomenon of Man*.²⁵ It is as though Teilhard de Chardin gave us the vision and the solution, like Fermat's last theorem, and we have been left trying to fill in the working.

Theological Working

The theological working involves puzzles like where is God (the creator and redeemer and source of providence and Holy Spirit and Wisdom) in the evolutionary process, especially in the twentieth century when it was associated with "blind pitiless indifference," although the author of that phrase (no less than Richard Dawkins) is now inching closer to faith himself.²⁶ It involves asking how do we put the common understanding of fallenness into dialogue with the long ages of our human becoming? And then there is the problem of evil. If Adam is not responsible for evil, who or what is, and how?

These have been the questions behind all my theological queries. Of course, in the end, that led me to epistemology, hermeneutics, theology of animals, healing, and ecological awareness. My theological whakapapa has constituted what many others might regard as side-streams, or territories of lesser significance. But for the subtribe of us involved in this area, these are really hard and important questions inextricably tied up with critical questions of human identity, morality, and our relationship with each other and the non-human world.

Process theology was one fold in that. It tried to be a critical voice in the twentieth century. It kept alive the idea that agency or prehension existed at all levels of

24 Peter Harrison speaks to this in *The Territories of Science and Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 27.

25 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row, 1961); *The Divine Milieu* (Harper, 1968).

26 Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (Basic Books, 1995), 133. More recently Dawkins has spoken affectionately of cultural Christianity in the UK, even calling himself a cultural Christian. This has been reported widely. See Richard Dawkins, "I'm a Cultural Christian," *LBC*, April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COHgEFUFWyg>.

creation and that God's lure is a constant power drawing creation into the future.²⁷ Everything, according to process theology is connected and everything has agency. Process was a way to be a secret vitalist until the biology changed. Which, inevitably, it did. I was never a signed-up member of the process theology tribe, but I could see it solved a few problems. People like John Haught, Ilia Delio, and Richard Rohr, who were also inspired by Teilhard de Chardin, were process people, or almost. As was Catherine Keller, my doctoral supervisor.

In the theological tradition, I was attracted to those who have always seen the Spirit of God in nature, and nature as full of spirit, which is most of the theological tradition in the West until the modern era. In the modern era it includes Jonathan Edwards, Schleiermacher, and not so much Karl Barth.

But a proper balance between the transcendence of God and God's immanence is also important, as Sarah Coakley exhorts. Immanence is shorthand for the ways in which the Creator God is entangled within and known through the creation. Transcendence is where this immanence is pointing, which is always away from the creation and towards the Source.²⁸

Science Workings

And there are workings to be filled in also from the side of science. Is evolution just natural selection? If it is, then everything we believe is hidden away, not visible. And yet the Scriptures and the Christian tradition give every impression that some of this should be obvious. In fact, as Peter Harrison has argued, it is not just the Christian tradition but the philosophical tradition as well that investigated the secrets of nature in order to know how to live. It was understood that ethics and close analysis of nature went hand in hand.²⁹ Darwin created a dramatic break from this connection, and for most of the twentieth century, the biological sciences were very, very clear. Randomness is key—life has no purpose and no direction.³⁰

Indeed, Mere Roberts and Peter Wills say:

This conception of the whole of reality as a continuous unfolding of vital generative processes, rather than as mechanical occurrences within inert material substance, is irreconcilable with most of modern science. However, the Māori worldview contains the seeds of a more sustainable relationship

27 See for instance, Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Fortress, 2008).

28 Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism, Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), loc. 1497, Kindle.

29 Peter Harrison, *Territories of Science and Religion*, ch. 2.

30 The earlier disruptor was the Reformation and its insistence that Scripture was the only source of knowledge about God. Doru Costache speaks to this in *A New Copernican Turn* (Routledge, 2025), 38.

between humanity and the world that science studies. Assimilation of conceptions like whakapapa and mauri into science would make it no longer possible, especially in biology, to separate questions of science and ethics.³¹

And then science changed again. There have always been dissenters to the standard neo-Darwinian model, but the mainstream change in biology happened two decades ago, and Simon Conway Morris was its most important and most distinguished beacon. Evolution does know where it is going, he argues. After all this time! He was the world's expert on convergence, or the idea that evolution keeps coming up with the same solutions again and again, strongly suggestive, at the very least, that the process is not completely random, but rather highly constrained. Twenty years ago, he wrote:

The heart of the problem . . . is to explain how it might be that we, a product of evolution, possess an overwhelming sense of purpose and moral identity yet arose by processes that were seemingly without meaning. If, however, we can begin to demonstrate that organic evolution contains deeper structures and potentialities, if not inevitabilities, then perhaps we can begin to move away from the dreary materialism of much current thinking with its agenda of a world now open to limitless manipulation.³²

And that is just the beginning. Since then, Conway Morris has written *Six Myths of Evolution*, and James Shapiro has written a summary essay in *Aeon* magazine.³³ But also noteworthy are the “extended evolutionary synthesis” in anthropology (Agustin Fuentes),³⁴ the emphasis on empathy in evolution (Deane-Drummond and de Waal),³⁵ the role of constraints in physics and chemistry (Philip Ball),³⁶ the co-evolutionary story of viruses and animals (including the placenta),³⁷ epigenetics, and the pioneering work of Denis Noble,³⁸ Dawkins’ teacher and critic. There is also the

31 Roberts and Wills, “Māori Epistemology,” 67.

32 Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

33 Simon Conway Morris, *From Extraterrestrials to Animal Minds: Six Myths of Evolution* (Templeton Press, 2022); James A. Shapiro, “Evolution without Accidents, Despite Advances in Molecular Genetics, Too Many Biologists Think That Natural Selection Is Driven by Random Mutations,” *Aeon*, July 6, 2023.

34 Agustín Fuentes, “The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, Ethnography, and the Human Niche: Toward an Integrated Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 57, no. S13 (2016): S14–S26.

35 Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal* (Eerdmans, 2014); Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton University, 2016).

36 Philip Ball, *Shapes: Nature's Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

37 Frank Ryan, *Virolution* (Harper Collins, 2013).

38 Denis Noble, *Dance to the Tune of Life: Biological Relativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

current emphasis on niche development as a driver in evolutionary change.³⁹ These theories bring significant changes to the worlds of science and theology. Theology no longer has to dance around a science that is determinedly anti-teleological. These changes to evolutionary theory make the vision of Teilhard de Chardin more coherent, filling in the folds that might constitute a whakapapa of the mind. It is like finding a family history, but not in order.

Part of the model now emphasised in biology includes the stunning constraints on the whole system, self-organisation of complex systems, anticipatory co-option, the role of physics and chemistry, deep sympathy and altruism in many animal lines, the dynamism of niche construction, and so on. These modifications of the model do not eliminate randomness, but they do allow for purpose, and they allow theology to sit more easily with the dialogue.⁴⁰ Theology has always been on the defensive in this area of what is visible and discernible of God in the natural world. Process theology, for instance, postulates life and actual occasions and all of everything within God, but not in a way that can be observed. This was always a part of the deal. Theology could say what it liked just so long as people of faith were not insisting we could see it. I would argue that the lure is now more potentially visible.

Practices

In the background for me has always been Michael Polanyi, the German Jewish refugee who spoke so eloquently about the personal contours of science.⁴¹ Data doesn't just rain down from heaven. It isn't just a left-brained activity. Science is done out of passion, conviviality, fiduciary trust, and imagination; beauty is a key to truth. You must have a tribe to do science. The community of discourse and experimentation is vital. And when science is understood in this way it is a natural ally of religion.

But science done this way is grounded in physical practices, experimentation, and a passion for discovering what is really there.⁴² It is a close ally of tools, very clever tools which have always been factors in the creation of the human mind since the early palaeolithic when the carving of stone tools preceded and possibly caused human consciousness and language. At what Rowan Williams calls the *Edge of Words*, words—acting like tools and in conjunction with tools—are found to forge

39 This is suggested by Deane-Drummond's use of "niche" and "Theo-Drama" in *The Wisdom of the Liminal*.

40 Randomness within constraints is also now known to be a way of allowing an organism or species to search a fitness landscape. And it keeps a system open and evolvable. See Graeme Finlay, "The Amazing Placenta: Evolution and Lifeline to Humanness," *Zygon* 55, no. 2 (2020): 306–26.

41 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago University Press, 1958).

42 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.

an encounter with the deepest levels of the cosmos or the cell or the atom.⁴³ Or the fungi that undergird all life, or the bizarre life forms that live underground and may determine the contours of life above ground, or the eleven dimensions that may coincide with our mundane four. At the edge of words we discover the disturbances, like folds, that will constantly upend our assumptions and settled places of mind.

Returning to the Vision

To return to the vision of Teilhard de Chardin. He was a palaeontologist. He laboured with bones and dust and the recreation of ancient ways of ancient people. It was out of this groundedness that his vision was born. I remember the passion of the scientists I have encountered, the smell of formaldehyde from my father's labs, the immense vision of the fusion lab in South England, the peace of Darwin's house in Kent, the patience in the archaeological dig in Indiana, the inferences from the artefacts and bones left in the dust. They are a part of a science/theology whakapapa as much as the abstract ideas.

Another anthropologist, Tim Ingold says:

There are two kinds of science. One of these has long been ascendant in the Western tradition. It imagines a world of elementary constituents, particles of matter that interact and combine in ever more complex and diverse configurations to compose the world we know from experience. In this world, solidity is primordial, fluidity derivative, identity and constancy come before difference and variation . . . But the world imagined by the other kind of science is opposite in every way. It is matter-full, not full of matter; its elements are given not as discrete particles but in the plenum of materials. Here the properties of things emerge not as the compound effects of punctuated interactions but as variations or irregularities in the material flux . . . Things in this world are not naturally solid; they have to be kept that way and, like eddies in a stream, they will do so only for as long as the flow carries on.⁴⁴

This is Tim Ingold, an anthropologist in the Western tradition, but different, and formed as much by his subject matter—ancient peoples— as by the methods of Western science. One of the reasons for trying to recover a whakapapa of the mind is that there are subtribes of the Western tradition, even contemporary ones, that resonate with Indigenous knowledge, with Mātauranga Māori. Ingold speaks of evolution in major and minor keys. The minor keys may be muted, but they do

43 Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

44 Tim Ingold, "Evolution in Minor and Major Keys," in *Evolution of Wisdom: Major and Minor Keys*, eds. Agustín Fuentes and Celia Deane-Drummond, Center for Theology, Science and Human Flourishing, University of Notre Dame (Press Books), <https://ctshf.pressbooks.com>.

resonate with Indigenous thoughtforms, enough to get a conversation going at least.

One point to all of this and to the struggle over identity would be to bring these worlds into closer contact. This would be one way of overcoming the whakapapa deficit, and the cultural deficit, if worlds of discourse could be allowed to speak to one another. I have gone on a journey that began with a sense of a lack of whakapapa. In articulating a whakapapa of the mind, I have also articulated that part of the Western tradition that has always been open to the mysterious and the paradoxical, to evolution in a minor key, to sensing the lure of God in nature, to parts that have always assumed a life force. These Western strands can come into some sort of dialogue with indigeneity. This doesn't get me any closer to land and whānau, but it does suggest that whakapapa might not always divide people groups in the way that I have experienced it.

Concluding Thoughts

There is another aspect to all of this. Christ is meant to be an idea, a person, an allegiance, a presence that cancels out some of the sense of lack a Pākehā might feel in the whakapapa deficit. As Māori and Pākehā we are all meant to be in this together, our various and numerous violations, oppressions, deprivations, failures and disappointments gathered up into the body and blood of Christ. As Christians and not just citizens, we do belong in Christ, and in Christ, we can strive to forgive those who offend against us, even when they are Church members themselves. Our deep sense of exile or lack can be the moment of opening up into the mystery of being human and Christian. At the same time, humans have always created and constructed and discovered patterns of worship, forms of community binding, and ways of incarnating the myth that do reflect something of the Kingdom of God on earth—whether this be in the Lord's Supper, a glorious orthodox service, ecstatic or formal dancing, gift giving and exchange, the provision of sacrificial hospitality, or welcoming the stranger.

Tim Ingold, again, has wisdom here.

[L]ives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places else where . . . wayfaring . . . It is as wayfarers, then, that human beings inhabit the earth . . . human existence . . . unfolds not in places but along paths. Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that life-lines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Tim Ingold, "Against Space: Place, Movement, Knowledge," in *Boundless Worlds: An Anthropological Approach to Movement*, ed. Peter Wynn Kirby, 29–43 (Berghahn Books, 2009), 37.

In Aotearoa, I suggest, we live not only in places but along paths. Like the branching paths of the evolutionary process, European New Zealanders have now evolved culturally along different paths from our ancestral home. We are now two hundred years different, some of us, or four hundred years if we take the evolution in both contexts seriously (although the journey has involved constant backwards interaction and entanglement), and the knot of our lives has now become irreversibly bound up with a different people who reached here, by another path eight hundred years ago. It is the knot we are now making that is interesting and painful. In this framing, alongside the emphasis on the idea of a fixed ethnic identity that is grounded in specific geographical locations, would be another account—that of humanity who have all been in constant motion, always migrating and expanding to the ends of the earth, planting gardens in Babylon (Jer 29:4–7). In such a vision, in the knots of our entanglement there is less emphasis on the place as a place of connection and more of an emphasis on how, as humans, we have all been restless, always migrating. The knot of our entanglement might become a thing of beauty if it is nurtured. I am part of a vast diaspora where connection to land is complicated. The longings associated with a lack of whakapapa of land and community will not be erased. And in a time when ecosystems are threatened a sense of connection to land is always important and necessary for flourishing of land and people. Nevertheless, a whakapapa of the mind gives some perspective and the ability to trace paths that have led to present knots of entanglement. My embrace of the themes of evolution and Christian faith suggests that something new is always being formed. Exile might yet be transformed. This newness was always the vision of Teilhard de Chardin, and his vision always combined a deep sense of the cosmic Christ with the reality of the long history of human journeying and entanglement.