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Culture and Ecotheology in Proximity to *Te Ao* Māori: An Interweaving

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In Aotearoa New Zealand, the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi and its revival in the 1970s have served as a catalyst for significant legal and customary changes, challenging and decolonizing the dominant Western culture and the church. *Te ao* Māori (Māori worldview) and *te reo* Māori (Māori language) act as an interruption to life as normal within a modernist framework, allowing room for nature's powers and *wairua* (spirit) to be appreciated in everyday life, in the science curriculum, and in the church. These changes have been instituted for justice and treaty reasons but have resulted in a profound metaphysical shift, opening space for a new integration of science and faith. Everyday life is also affected, including media, government, education, language, personhood for natural features, stories, rituals, and health care. *Te ao* Māori has challenged the naturalism and reductionism of Western science, encouraging a metaphysics much more favorable to all faith and all ecotheological concerns. In partnership with *te ao* Māori, Western theological language is enlarged, restored, and reframed.

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> *[L]ives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that life-lines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot.*
>
> Tim Ingold, *Boundless Worlds: An Anthropological Approach to Movement*

Introduction

This article is written as a European New Zealander, or Pākehā, living in a world very different from that of my ancestors, who go back five generations to 1840 in Aotearoa New Zealand on my father's side.[1] I am a lay Anglican theologian, trained in the United States but now living in Aotearoa. The argument of this article emerges from a long-standing dissatisfaction with the science/theology conversation as it is usually framed. That dialogue has largely taken place within categories shaped by Western scientific paradigms and categories, and its tensions are therefore, in most respects, a distinctly Pākehā problem. From that location, I examine the incorporation of Mātauranga Māori (Māori ways of knowing), *te reo* Māori (Māori language), and *te ao* Māori (Māori worldview) into New Zealand common life, science education, law, and ecclesial practice. I do so not as an interpreter of *te ao* Māori, but as a Pākehā attending to what is now visible and generative in shared public spaces.

My central claim is that the contemporary resurgence of *te ao* Māori is producing more than social or symbolic change and greater equity. It is also loosening the hold of a reductive secular imagination by making public space more hospitable to concepts such as *wairua* (spirit), *mauri* (life force), *whakapapa* (genealogy), and multiple layers of causality. This matters especially in the field of science, where the inclusion of *Mātauranga* Māori opens a framework in which multiple levels of explanation can coexist without collapsing into direct competition. I am not arguing that historical injustice has been overcome; rather, I argue that the growing public presence of *te ao* Māori is widening and shifting the metaphysical conditions of common life in ways that make both science/faith dialogue and eco-theological reflection more culturally plausible.

The Treaty Revival and Aotearoa's Shifting Metaphysical Horizon

Before turning to the present-day incorporation of *Mātauranga* Māori into everyday life and science teaching, I will briefly sketch the historical setting. Two recent histories of Aotearoa New Zealand, Michael Belgrave's (2024) *Becoming Aotearoa* and Erik Olssen's (2025) *The Origins of an Experimental Society*, explore the ways in which Pākehā and Māori cultures have mutually influenced each other and continue to do so. That mutuality should not obscure the violence of settler history, including measures such as the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, which criminalized Māori healing practices (Belgrave 2024, 546). The limited

argument of this article is not intended to gloss over injustices, systemic or intermittent. It is saying that out of the wheat and tares of colonial history something new has emerged in the last fifty years that has shifted the whole culture into a different register, albeit with some resistance.

Before 1840, the British had no clear intention of colonizing New Zealand. But the increasing numbers of missionaries; sealers; convicts from Australia; potential settlers fleeing famine, class stigma, and deprivation at home; and other adventurers forced their hand (Olssen 2025, 156–57). The first steps included a Declaration of Independence/He Whakaputanga, signed or marked by Māori chiefs in 1835, asserting New Zealand sovereignty and independence from Britain. Following on from that was the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a groundbreaking document signed by Māori chiefs and the British Crown in 1840. This hard-won agreement gave more heed to the people of the land than previous English colonies had done, and it was to have far-reaching consequences. In 1841, New Zealand became a fledgling colony of Britain, struggling to gain economic solvency and any common understanding of land ownership between the two cultures (Belgrave 2024, 248–52). The treaty was quickly betrayed and was always muddled by the language chasm; it has dual Māori and English versions.

Some would dismiss the original treaty as forged in bad faith by the missionaries who were translating it into *te reo* and intentionally deceptive in its use of words. Recently, Ned Fletcher (2022) has argued that the two versions agree, and "sovereignty" in the treaty is in reference only to English settlers. It is not necessary to take a position on these issues to see that the institution of the treaty has now had wide-ranging outcomes and an imaginative application well beyond its original intentions. The treaty, concluded in haste and confusion in 1840, has borne fruit. Some of its intentions were egalitarian; this was, after all, an era that saw the British government legislate against slavery (1807, 1833), an age dominated by new humanitarian thinking (Olssen 2025, 154). The treaty encapsulates in law a level of equality in ownership and outcomes that, while far from realized, is an ongoing, hard-worked-for goal requiring the decolonizing and reimagining of all areas of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. The changes may be only symbolic, and there is much work still to do. Time will tell definitively. But symbols have a way of wielding their power, and I am arguing that this is already happening.

These outcomes are only possible because the treaty was revived in 1975 with the founding of the Waitangi Tribunal, under which the treaty now serves as an unofficial constitution, bringing ongoing and deeply felt changes, both critical and constructive, to New Zealand's common life, education, church,[2] and law. Apart from land reparations, the tribunal also oversees widespread changes and decolonizing challenges to every ritual, expression, and institution in New Zealand life. Education, medicine, government, health, and law are all affected (Waitangi Tribunal, n.d.). The original treaty and its subsequent implementation and enforcement have enabled not only decolonization but a

positive and imaginative bicultural blending and interweaving of language that are capable of shifting common metaphysical assumptions toward the spiritual and cultural and make Aotearoa New Zealand unusual in the contemporary world. In New Zealand, the revival of the Waitangi Treaty, though much contested and challenging in its implementation, has served as a form of collective "repentance"—together with an ongoing decolonizing narrative—for previous breaches of trust.

Half a century into this new order, spoken and written English is now transformed. Māori language is everywhere and recognized and used even by those who have no formal training. The concepts of *whānau* (family), *iwi* and *hapū* (tribe and subtribe), *tangata whenua* (people of the land), *wairua* (spirit), *tapu* (sacred), *kaitiaki* (guardian), *mauri* (life force), *taniwha* (monsters), *whakapapa* (genealogy), *tikanga* (custom), *kapa haka* (formal song and dance), and *karakia* (prayer), and so on are deeply ingrained in and sprinkled through spoken English, along with Māori greetings, myths, and names for things (Roy 2018; de Bres 2010). Major events and school years begin with *pōwhiri* (formal Māori welcoming ceremony), spoken mostly in *te reo*. Graduation ceremonies are studded with spontaneous *waiata* (song) interjections by family. Meetings begin with *karakia*. I assert that the proximity and embeddedness of a language with quite a different metaphysics have nudged secular New Zealand culture away from a generic Western materialism, and have the potential to move it further.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, I locate the discussion within the history of treaty revival and contemporary decolonizing discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand. Second, I draw on Taylor's (2007, 233, 517) account of secularism and social imaginary to suggest how *te ao* Māori works to "re-enchant" the world and open the common culture to *wairua* (spirit) realities. Third, and most importantly, I examine science education as the clearest site at which this *te ao* Māori interruption becomes consequential. Case studies from other areas of life are also noted. Finally, I consider the implications of this widening cultural imagination for churches and ecotheology, arguing that a society more open to *wairua* and the vitality of the natural world is also more open to theological and ecological forms of thought.

Decolonization Critiques Have a Stake in This Story

This article does not argue that the revival of the treaty and the formation of the tribunal have magically eliminated injustice or whitewashed the past. A conversation led by critical race theory and the decolonizing literature (Asafo and Tuiburelevu 2021) continues alongside these arguments. I acknowledge that both critical race theory and post-colonialism have a stake in this story. Science stands in an unstable relationship to both and is often seen as a particularly egregious form of white supremacy (Sheldon et al. 2023, 9). I would agree that there are aspects of science that resonate with the current power structures

in imperialistic, racist, and sexist ways, and also that contemporary science perpetuates a reductionistic, mechanistic worldview that is hard to escape. But I continue to believe that humans have always done something like science, and that many of the findings and methods of the sciences increase our sense of awe in the world (a common religious sentiment), are an extraordinary application of human imagination and discovery (McLeish 2016), and will help us in the urgent tasks ahead, especially those of feeding the world, converting to sustainable energy, and climate change mitigation.

Christian theology is subject to a related critique because of its entanglement with settler history. I would argue there are wheat and tares in this narrative also. Missionary activity in Aotearoa New Zealand was undeniably mixed in motive, but Māori engagement with Christian faith was also early, substantial, and often Māori-led (Belgrave 2024, 103, 115; Kaa 2020, 30). Māori communities did not merely absorb imported belief. Hirini Kaa (2020, 7–8) has argued that Māori were changed by contact but responded dynamically to the pressures by adapting and coopting the gospel for their own purposes and expression. Similarly, theology today can simultaneously be implicated in colonial sins as well as an agent of renewal.

The academic dialogue between science and religion has flourished for decades, yet it has often failed to reshape popular imagination or ecclesial practice. One reason is that theology has largely acquiesced to the naturalism of science and tried to squeeze itself between the cracks (as argued by Paul Tyson [2022]). The rapprochement offered was never satisfactory or satisfying. This is why the increasing presence of Mātauranga Māori within science education is so significant. It does not merely ask whether theology can survive within a naturalistic frame; it helps expose the limits of that frame itself.

Myrna Perez Sheldon, Ahmed Ragab, and Terrence Keel describe one hope of critical work on science and religion as the creation of alternative futures in which we might live better together (Sheldon et al. 2023, 4). I am making the very limited claim in this short article that the Waitangi Tribunal and associated Māori renaissance in Aotearoa New Zealand are moving towards this goal and already helping to create a public space more capable of sustaining wider accounts of reality than hitherto allowed.

Why *Te Ao* Māori Changes What Is Plausible

Taylor's *A Secular Age* provides a helpful conceptual frame because it explains secularity not simply as a decline in belief but as a transformation in what a society takes to be plausible. In late medieval Europe, disbelief was possible, but belief remained the default horizon. The world was experienced as charged with agency, symbol, mediation, and spiritual significance. Taylor (2007, chap. 1) argues that modernity gradually replaced this enchanted world with an immanent

order in which natural processes could be understood without reference to God or other spiritual powers.

When Europeans made contact with Māori, they encountered a world in which land, ancestors, people, gods, and communal life were understood as deeply interwoven. By that time, European culture was already on its way to becoming the "Western" culture against which indigeneity has distinguished itself. European culture had come through the Reformation with its democratization and reform of religion and started a process of critique and doubt concerning deep sacred realities. Science was beginning to take precedence over religion, education over church. In Taylor's (2007, 98) words, this led to a disenchantment of the world and to its portrayal as a large machine to which God may or may not providentially attend.

Although most of us who are religious find this "immanent order" unsatisfying, it is the sea in which we all swim (Taylor 2007, 306, 309). Throughout the past few hundred years, Māori have at first tentatively—and in the past fifty years, increasingly—held onto and revived an Indigenous view of the world in spite of embracing the religion of their colonizers and much of the technical capacity of *te ao* Pākehā, beginning with paper, muskets, writing, and English law. While *te ao* Māori was always a latent voice within the culture, it is now a significant partner with *te ao* Pākehā in New Zealand society, as I argue here, and therefore has the potential to disrupt and even partially reverse the secularizing project.

The Waitangi Tribunal (n.d.), as the current interpreter of the original treaty, deals not only in the business of reparation and restoration of land and resources to Māori tribes (*iwi*), it also safeguards and encourages—under Article 3 of the treaty—the use of Māori language (*reo*), *taonga* (treasure), and *tikanga* (custom) at every level of Aotearoa New Zealand society. In the past fifty years (and especially in the past twenty), this has led to gradual and increasing use of *te reo* in the public sphere, and Mātauranga Māori is now influential and visible in every institution and classroom.

The following case studies—science teaching, legal personhood, ritual practice, public story, and health—offer a snapshot of that change. Taken together, they suggest a culture in which *wairua* and more-than-human agency are becoming easier to name in public. My claim is not that Aotearoa New Zealand has become post-secular in any simple sense, but that its social imaginary is widening in ways that matter for both theology and ecotheology.

Science as the Crucial Locus of Disruption

Although the Waitangi Tribunal reforms affect many areas of public life, the most consequential arena for this article is science. Science matters here not because it is culturally neutral but because it has so often been treated in modern universities as the paradigmatic discourse of objectivity and the

principal counterweight to anything spiritual. If *te ao* Māori is altering the conceptual world of science education, then it is reshaping one of the strongest institutional carriers of secular modernity. Ocean Mercier and Anne-Marie Jackson (2019, 63) said recently: "Māori have become a pivotal force in New Zealand's science system, with the torsion of tikanga Māori inviting the system to open its doors to indigenous values. Increasingly, Mātauranga Māori—encompassing Māori knowledge, Māori methods of knowledge creation and Māori ways of knowing—is being consulted, aligned with or brought into conversation with science."

Across Aotearoa New Zealand, substantial changes are occurring in school science and undergraduate teaching. These reforms are often described as efforts to decolonize science, but for the purposes of this article, their significance is more specific: they expand what counts as a meaningful account of nature. The development of *Pūtaiao*, or Māori science projects grounded in local knowledge, Indigenous values, and community-shaped research questions, is especially important here (Moko-Painting 2023). Such initiatives do not simply add cultural content to an otherwise unchanged discipline. They press on the assumptions of the sciences themselves by emphasizing relation, value, and inherited forms of knowledge.

These reforms have included proposals for the compulsory teaching of Mātauranga Māori within undergraduate science, and there has been widespread debate over what such inclusion should mean. Although some initiatives have met political resistance, the broader shift is now well established across tertiary and school settings. The opposition has often come from those who insist that science is universal only when detached from cultural and metaphysical contexts (Dunlop 2021). Yet the Aotearoa New Zealand debate itself demonstrates the opposite point: science education is never taught in a vacuum, and disputes over what belongs in it are also disputes about what kinds of reality and value a society is willing to acknowledge.

The material taught under and alongside Mātauranga Māori operates on several levels. At one level, courses taught within the science faculty offer historical and philosophical arguments for recognizing Indigenous knowledge traditions as serious sites of observation, experiment, and practical reasoning rather than as prescientific residue (Parke 2024; Moko-Painting 2023). At another, it introduces students to the richness of Māori epistemology and the ways knowledge is situated within community, narrative, and inherited practice (Roberts and Wills 1998). These layers matter because they already widen the conception of what modern science imagines itself to be.

At another level, Māori narratives of origin and *whakapapa* (genealogy) are placed alongside biological and cosmological explanations. In schools, this can include teaching Māori creation narratives alongside more familiar scientific accounts of planetary, stellar, and biological evolution. This opens up a

model of coexistence rather than competition between frames of reference, allowing minds to encompass and be comfortable with multiple explanatory levels. It fosters intellectual comfort with layered explanation and weakens the assumption that meaningful knowledge must always be objective, mechanistic, and disenchanted.

Whakapapa is crucial here because it traces entities through relation, descent, and origin rather than isolating them as discrete objects. An example is Mere Robert's *whakapapa* of the *kumara* (sweet potato). The *whakapapa* "framework," she says, "embraces multiple ontologies concerning how things came to be, each of which is grounded in knowledge of natural science (primarily biological) as well as spiritual knowledge" (Roberts 2013, 93). The *whakapapa* of the *kumara* involves a story of theft from the high heavens, the human birth of the ancestors of terrestrial *kumara*, the banishment of the woman involved to the underground with the rat that still lives on the *kumara*, and the scattering of the first descendants with their *kumara* to far-flung islands (Roberts 2013, 95–96). The plant, its local ecology, and predators are all accounted for, as well as the introduction of theft into the world. Unlike Christian creationism, the Māori narratives are not set up in competition with science; rather, they fill out a wider context, while containing hints of a transcendent aspect to all natural processes.

A related feature is the movement toward holism. Māori knowledge places phenomena within wider ecological, genealogical, and spiritual relations rather than as beginning from isolated units alone (Moko-Painting 2023, 10). Contemporary Western science is certainly capable of ecological and connected thinking, but its dominant habits of analysis have tended to privilege reduction, specialization, and abstraction. By contrast, concepts such as *whakapapa*, *mauri*, and *wairua* encourage a vision of deep interconnectedness. This is one reason Mātauranga Māori resonates so strongly with eco-theological concerns.

Values are equally important. *Pūtaiao* is not imagined as value-neutral inquiry but as knowledge pursued for the flourishing of community and environment (Moko-Painting 2023, 11-12). This does not mean that Western science lacks ethical frameworks, but in Māori contexts, value is not an external restraint placed upon knowledge after the fact. It is part of the rationale for inquiry itself.

Most consequentially, concepts such as *mauri* and *wairua* enter the orbit of scientific discussion, even when they remain contested. Chemistry professor Paul Kilmartin (who has Ngāi Tahu heritage), for example, rejects the claim that *mauri* literally holds matter together, yet the debate itself is revealing, as it marks a boundary that science is now being asked to justify rather than simply assume (Kilmartin 2023). Likewise, work such as Natasha Tassell-Matamua's research on near-death experiences shows that questions of spirit are no longer entirely excluded from serious inquiry (Tassell-Matamua and Lindsay 2016). My claim is not that science has embraced Indigenous metaphysics wholesale, but that it is being pressed into a wider conversation about what counts as reality.

Finally, Mātauranga Māori stresses continuity with ancestral practice: navigation, healing, astronomy, and botanical knowledge are treated not as disconnected curiosities from the past but as living inheritances now being renewed (Whaanga, Harris, and Matamua 2020). Taken together, these developments make it easier to imagine science as capable of layered causality, inherited wisdom, ethical purpose, and even spiritual reference. In that sense, Mātauranga Māori interrupts the secular habit of treating *wairua* as inadmissible from the outset. It does not abolish scientific method. It does, however, challenge the metaphysical narrowness that has often travelled under science's name.

All these influences make it possible to incorporate and integrate the religious and the enchanted into the science story and method. They push the telos of science towards something always in touch with social, spiritual, and environmental wellbeing, and the discourse of science under this transformation becomes more and more attuned to *wairua* rather than in contradiction to it. Multiple levels of causality, telos, and explanation are investigated and allowed.

Mātauranga Māori interrupts the long secular project in which the notion of *wairua* is entirely absent from all discussion of life and scientific law and descriptions of reality. It encourages the idea that the highly specialized and method-focused science of today has its history in the observations, pattern recognition, and applications of Māori and European cultures in the past. This is also seen in the widening of topics under investigation as science. The consideration of unseen realities in Mātauranga within the science narrative opens up the idea of purpose inherent in nature, something banished for over a hundred years in the Western paradigm.

Everyday Ritual and Public Spirituality Reinforce the Power of *Wairua*

The shift is not confined to formal education. If it were only a curricular debate, its metaphysical significance would be limited. What matters is that many New Zealanders now encounter *te ao* Māori in routine civic and social practice. One clear example is the *pepeha* (introduction), or *mihi*. When Māori introduce themselves, they mention their river, mountain, tribe, and the *waka* (canoe) that brought them to Aotearoa many centuries ago, because these are the ecological realities that nourish their being. In that simple act of the introduction is a worldview in a nutshell. Pākehā, too, now commonly speak about their family and connections in an introduction, but without claiming the full connection to land. Even when the inner discourse is about a lack, however, we are brought into an urgent connection with land and people as significant to life, culture, *wairuai*, and meaning (Hoggard Creegan 2026).

Likewise, *kapa haka* (ceremonial welcome) and *karakia* (prayer) now appear in many schools, workplaces, and public institutions. In a more conventionally secular frame, prayer would seem out of place in such settings. Yet *karakia*

has become common in contexts ranging from university governance to local committees. Sometimes these prayers are theologically explicit; sometimes they are more general invocations of blessing, remembrance, or orientation. In either case, they reopen a public space in which spiritual address is no longer confined to churches. These habits nurture more openness to spiritual realities.

Through the rituals of introduction and prayer, and the bonds of *kapa haka*, a connected worldview is formed where people are seen as parts of a story that reaches back to family and tribe in the past, as well as to the creatures, streams, mountains, and waterways of the environment today.

Law and the Living World

The legal sphere provides an even more explicit example. Aotearoa New Zealand was the first country to grant legal personhood to a river, recognizing the Whanganui River as "an indivisible and living whole" that includes both physical and metaphysical elements (Te Awa Tupua Act 2017). Legal personhood for nature is now discussed internationally, but in Aotearoa New Zealand, this development is especially significant because it arises from Māori understandings of relational belonging and has entered the ordinary grammar of public law. The point is not only environmental protection. It is the formal acknowledgement that the natural world may not be adequately described as inert property.

As Simon Day (2017) notes in conversation with Jacinta Ruru, this is a disruptive union of a Western legal device with a Māori worldview that understands the environment as a living entity with its own history and agency. The importance of that disruption is cultural as well as legal. It invites Pākehā publics to imagine a world in which agency, value, and dignity are not restricted to human consciousness alone.

This does not in itself overturn Enlightenment assumptions. It does, however, make them less self-evident. Once rivers can be named in law as living wholes, a strictly disenchanted account of nature no longer appears culturally inevitable.

Stories Also Encourage Re-Enchantment

Public storytelling is another important site of change. Children in Aotearoa New Zealand learn about the gods Papatūānuku and Ranginui and how their son Tāne (the god of the forests) separated his parents, bringing light and life to the world. The public holiday of Matariki in mid-winter, which celebrates the Māori new year and the appearance of the Pleiades star cluster in the morning sky, has further strengthened the collective consciousness of te ao Maori. Matariki embeds reflection, renewal, remembrance, and celestial rhythm within the national calendar. These narratives do more than transmit cultural heritage. They familiarize a secular public with a world in which land, sky, ancestry, and spiritual agency belong together.

The results of this story are multifaceted. One result is that the Indigenous association of the world's natural forces with the mystique and mystery of the gods will spill over into the general "social imaginary." The overall effect is a loosening of a largely fact-based curriculum and the introduction of an idea that *wairua* and nature are intimately linked, even if that does not penetrate deeply in many cases. It is a part of the overall picture and a general movement towards a metaphysical opening, towards what Taylor might label a "re-enchanting."

A Widened Cultural Environment

The case studies mentioned are only representative. Similar developments are visible in politics, media, institutional naming, health, and public policy. In health, for example, Māori-centered models influenced by the work of Mason Durie stress spiritual, familial, mental, and bodily dimensions of wellbeing rather than treating the person as a merely physical unit (Wilson 2021, 3542). Across these fields, *te ao* Māori and *te reo* Māori contribute to a more relational public grammar and a more holistic understanding of human flourishing.

Aotearoa New Zealand's situation is unusual among settler societies for many historical reasons, including the Waitangi Tribunal, the compactness of the country, the resilience of *te reo* Māori, and long histories of cultural contact and intermarriage (Belgrave 2024, 928). The result is not a harmonious synthesis, nor the disappearance of conflict, but a public sphere in which Māori concepts have unusual reach. That reach matters because language, law, ritual, education, and story together make certain visions of reality easier to inhabit.

There is resistance to all of this, and the outcome remains contested. Yet the cumulative effect of these multiple domains is significant. Science, law, ritual, health, media, and public story together help form a new social imaginary in which *wairua*, relation, and the vitality of the natural world are more difficult to exclude. It is from that widening cultural background that the theological implications now emerge.

In the remainder of this article, I examine the repercussions of this metaphysical opening up and flowering of Indigenous culture for churches and, potentially, ecotheology.

How *Te Ao* Māori Changes Theological Reception

These cultural shifts matter for churches because they alter the background conditions in which theological language is heard. For anyone working in science and theology, the changes in Aotearoa New Zealand are especially striking. They reopen questions about evidence, explanation, relation, creatureliness, and the place of *wairua* in public discourse. *Te ao* Māori does not simply support ecological thinking in churches by moral exhortation; it helps recover a wider

imagination of creation, interdependence, and belonging that theological language has often struggled to communicate within a secular frame.

Ecotheology and the Reopened World

This unusual situation in Aotearoa New Zealand coincides with the rise of ecotheology. Over the past half century, Christian thinkers have responded to Lynn White Jr.'s (1967) influential critique of Christianity as the cause of the ecological crisis. White links ecological degradation to technological expansion and capitalist extraction as misplaced examples of dominion in action. White makes a plea for a more Franciscan approach to Christianity. And indeed, more recently, Pope Francis's (2015) *Laudato Si'* has helped normalize Franciscan-inspired theological language about care for creation, integral ecology, and the deep interdependence of life. The A Rocha movement (Arocha.org) is active in Aotearoa New Zealand and in twenty-two countries, including Ghana, India, England, and Portugal, promoting practical church involvement in the guardianship of nature. These theological innovations already resonate strongly with Māori emphases on relation, value, and the living world.

Ecotheology has developed along several lines: rereadings of scripture that highlight the Earth and its creatures, critiques of anthropocentrism, renewed attention to salvation as cosmic rather than merely individual, and ecological accounts of Christ, spirit, and creation as mutually embraced realities (Pattel and Habel 2022; Pattel 2023; Johnson 2015; Wright 2018). Across these developments runs a shared rejection of a narrow theology that concerns only God and humanity while the rest of the natural world remains peripheral. In that respect, ecotheology has already been moving toward a more relational and creaturely vision of faith.

Other emphases note the importance to Christians of seeing the natural world as creation rather than the materialism of Western science (Moltmann 1993; Johnson 2015). The latter is more consistent with the casual dominion-led instrumental reaction to the natural world that White's (1967) critique of Christianity implies. The former allows that nature has its own agency and worth. And, indeed, ecotheology also points to the deep resonance between theology and the natural world before the Enlightenment, extending back to Clement of Alexandria (Doru Costache [2025] summarizes Clement's theology of nature) but extending as far into modernity as Jonathan Edwards ([1765]1989, 540), who famously saw lower forms of love in the symmetries and beauties of nature.

In summary, theology has experienced significant changes over the past fifty years. Ecotheology promotes a broader and more inclusive understanding of God's domain, influence, and concern than was common in late modernity. The past fifty years of Christian theology have seen a notable shift towards nature, with much less of an instrumental approach at the grassroots level.

Ecotheology also highlights the integrity and intelligence of other life forms and the interconnectedness of all living things. Much of this has been carefully argued in both theology and animal and life sciences (see Deane-Drummond 2009, 2017). Incremental progress has been made. There has been a gradual metaphysical expansion, with ideas like panpsychism or idealism replacing traditional materialism (Leidenhag 2020). However, it remains challenging for these theological reflections and advances to have much purchase on the ground.

That purchase is immensely improved when the culture as a whole has partially embraced a more ecological narrative, which allows a deepening of the sense of interconnection and a partial re-enchantment of the world.

Science-Engaged Theology and Mātauranga Māori

The effects are especially visible in the dialogue between science and faith. Both Mātauranga Māori and science-engaged theology resist the idea that modern science is a wholly unprecedented mode of knowing with no meaningful continuity with older practices of observation, discernment, and interpretation (McLeish 2016). Both also question whether objectivity and double-blind trials, valuable as they are, exhaust the range of human knowing. In different ways, each insists that a world open to meaning, spirit, relation, and inherited wisdom need not be a world closed to disciplined inquiry. For that reason, Mātauranga Māori becomes a powerful ally for science-engaged theology. It publicly legitimates the very possibility of layered explanation that theology has long struggled to defend.

Church and Culture in a Widened World

The Mātauranga conversation may help expand the thought-world of theology as well.

Christian faith has long insisted that reality is more than mechanism: that God is present through spirit, sacrament, wisdom, word, liturgy, providence, and creation itself (Moltmann 1993). Yet these affirmations are often difficult to hear within a culture trained to regard them as private or symbolic at best. In *te ao* Māori, Christian theology may find not a substitute for its own tradition but a public environment in which its deeper claims once again sound thinkable.

A Māori theologian once suggested that before missionary contact, Māori could already see the mountain of theology, though it remained mist-covered; after contact, the mist lifted (quoted in Mātenga 2025, 1). Whatever one makes of that image, it can be meaningfully reversed. If Western theology has often focused on the summit—abstract doctrine, isolated propositions, thin liturgical memory—then *te ao* Māori helps bring the mountain's larger body back into view: land, kinship, ancestry, community, and the living environment in which faith is actually embodied. In that sense, *te ao* Māori can provide a richer harmonic

context for themes Christian theology already contains but has often rendered inaccessible to secular publics and even the churches themselves.

Biblical Theology Resonates with *Te Ao* Māori

Biblical language also resonates in striking ways with *te ao* Māori. Christian theology speaks of "being in Christ," of "Christ in us," of light, wisdom, spirit, and the participation of creatures in divine life. Within a reductively material frame, such language can sound opaque or merely metaphorical. Māori concepts of *whakapapa*, relation, and spiritual continuity help reopen a grammar in which such claims become more intelligible. *Whakapapa* traces realities back through layered belonging to an originating source (Marsden 2003, 45). In that sense, it offers a suggestive analogue for thinking about participation, creation, and the relational depth of Christian existence.

Western theology has continued to say these things about sacrament and incarnation, even as the mechanistic grammar of the sciences left less and less space for a faith perspective. Marilynne Robinson (2010, 35) speaks to this when she says: "To a great degree, theology has tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time. But the beauty and strangeness persist just the same. And theology persists, even when it has absorbed as truth theories and interpretations that could reasonably be expected to kill it off. This suggests that its real life is elsewhere, in a place not reached by these doubts and assaults."

Theology has persisted through modernity, but often under pressure and with diminished cultural resonance. In a world widened by *te ao* Māori, theological speech about creation, spirit, sacrament, and creaturely interdependence may once again breathe more freely.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the resurgence of *te ao* Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand is doing more than reshaping questions of justice, language, and national identity. It is also widening the metaphysical conditions of public life. Through changes in science education, law, ritual, story, and institutional practice, concepts such as *wairua*, *whakapapa*, *mauri*, and more-than-human relation have become more publicly thinkable. That widening does not abolish secularism, nor does it erase colonial injustice. It does, however, loosen the monopoly of reductive materialism and create a cultural environment in which theological and eco-theological claims can be heard differently. In that sense, proximity to *te ao* Māori may be accomplishing something the science-and-theology conversation has rarely achieved on its own: it is helping to make a more relational, spiritually alert, and ecologically charged account of reality publicly plausible.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Society for Science and Religion 2025 Summer Conference in Swindon, UK.

[2] By church, I refer here to the wider collection of churches, not at all unified, but together bearing witness to Christ. The Anglican Church in particular has three *tikanga* (divisions)—Māori, Pākehā, and Polynesian—and three archbishops, together with a heated discussion about the pros and cons of such an arrangement. Churches differ enormously in their ecological commitment, but the established churches are all highly active and engaged. The A Rocha eco-church movement is strong and encourages ecological applications in preaching and liturgy as well as practical creation care work.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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