

Introduction

The Maori people of New Zealand belong to that family of peoples generally known as Polynesian. There have been many attempts to determine where they came from. Most likely their origins lie somewhere in eastern Indonesia or the Philippines whence they migrated through Melanesia and Micronesia into the so-called Polynesian Triangle. This area in the Pacific is bounded by Hawaii in the North, New Zealand in the South and Easter Island in the East. Modern research suggests that the movement of these people began far back, between 2,000 and 1,000 BC (Bellwood: 20f). It is thought that the settlement of New Zealand took place before 1,000 AD and that larger and smaller migrations occurred until about 1500 AD.

Polynesians speak some 30 closely related languages, with a large number of dialects. These are a branch of a wider grouping known as Austronesian (Bellwood: 26).

While there is no absolute certainty, archaeological and linguistic research indicates that the New Zealand Maori derives in the main from the Cook Islands, the Society Islands and possibly the Marquesan group (Bellwood: 152).

Examination of the myths and legends of the New Zealand Maori shows that many of the higher gods of the pre-European religion are the same as those found in the ancient religions of Eastern Polynesia, although some (e.g. *Tangaroa*) are known farther west. Thus, archaeologically, linguistically and religiously the people of Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand) are linked with Polynesia.

This monograph attempts to describe the religious rites and beliefs of the Maori people of New Zealand as they were at the time of the coming of the *Pakeha* (European). To accomplish this we must examine the myths and legends of the people in some detail. It scarcely should be necessary to point out that it is no longer acceptable to dismiss pre-European religion as mere superstition and ignorance. As Berger points out, "every society is engaged in the never completed enterprise of building a humanly meaningful world".² At the same time we should not assume that the early Maori thinkers were incapable of philosophical reflection (as will be shown), although the expression of such reflection was in mythological form, not in creeds or confessions of faith. In line with

modern practice the early religion of the New Zealand Maori will be referred to as "primal", to indicate that it was their first religion and not that it was necessarily inferior. The term may be ambiguous but is not offensive (Turner: 27f). The standpoint of the writer is that religion is a response to the sacred, although the rituals expressing response are the devising of the specialists of the sacred. Tribal societies have profound thinkers and acute minds even though a characteristic of primal religion is that it is geared to a technologically and economically simple people. Primal religions differ from some of the major World religions insofar as the latter are based on or relate to historical figures (e.g. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad etc.), are strongly ethical in character, have strong missionary tendencies and are exclusivistic. None of this is the case with the primal religions which are tolerant of religions of other people, do not attempt to convert others and lack organised and rational accounts of beliefs (expressing them instead in their myths and rituals).

There is frequently interpenetration of primal religions and the great world religions, and this interpenetration throws light on the way the new religion has been understood in terms of the primal society. One would wish to say that when an observer meets what is obviously a survival from a primal religion, this should not be dismissed out of hand; rather, the observer should look for what positive function the surviving concept performs. Only thus can there be a meeting of minds.

Maori Cosmology

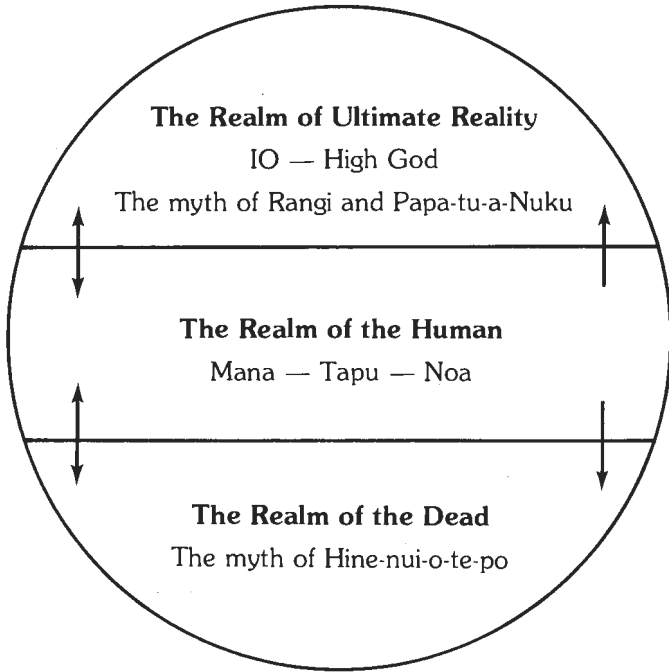


Diagram 1



King Tawhiao

Tawhiao was the second Maori King and is the epitome of the Prophet-Priest-King.
Gottfried Lindauer. Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand.