



Volume Three

The Religious Mentality of Father Vibaud

Sandy Harman

French Programme, Humanities, University of Waikato, NZ

Abstract

Father Jean-Marie Vibaud worked in New Zealand as a Marist missionary from 1903-1939. The French priest's 1909 manuscript on Māori religious mentality was intended to instruct future missionaries while debunking the notion that the Catholic missions had failed because Māori lacked religious sincerity. A close reading of the manuscript, however, reveals as much about Vibaud's views and beliefs as those of the Māori. In a time of racial tension, mistrust, and corruption, Vibaud persevered with the Society of Mary's evangelical mission: to administer to the spiritual needs of indigenous communities in New Zealand. Yet his writings convey the internal conflicts of a man who had dedicated himself to the Catholic Church, only to find himself questioning its methods and increasingly fascinated by the beliefs and traditions of the very people he was sent to convert. By exploring Father Vibaud's manuscript according to its socio-historic context, we can gain valuable insight into Catholic missionary mentality in early 20th century New Zealand. Vibaud reminds us that these missionaries, sometimes exalted as heroes and sometimes indicted as cultural invaders, faced a lifetime of struggle in trying to reconcile their obligations to the Catholic Church and to the Society of Mary, their faith in evangelism and their loyalty to the Māori people.

The Religious Mentality of Father Vibaud

Early New Zealand missionaries have been described as “the advance party of cultural invasion,” (Walker, 1990, p. 85) with regard to their role in the Europeanisation of New Zealand and subsequent marginalisation of Māori. At the same time, many missionaries were, and still are, praised and loved by many Māori and Pakeha communities for their efforts to aid Māori communities in their struggle for survival and self-determination. We must keep in mind, however, that each missionary and each mission did not function the same way as the next, and as this paper will illustrate, a missionary's mentality was complex and ever-changing, as were the issues and conflicts he or she faced.

Samuel Marsden, pioneer of the Church Missionary Society, and Henry Williams, reverend and controversial [\[1\]](#) translator of the Treaty of Waitangi: two names that many New Zealanders would recognise as central figures from the period in which New Zealand was established as a British colony. Jean-Baptiste Pompallier, Catholic Bishop and notorious spendthrift, and Suzanne Aubert, reverend mother, healer and entrepreneur: names that some New Zealanders may recognise from biographies written by Lillian Keys and Jessie Munro respectively. Father Jean-Marie Vibaud is however a much less familiar figure in New Zealand history.

Father Vibaud was part of The Society of Mary, a branch of Catholicism that emphasised Mary's characteristics of humility and poverty. Known as the Marists, followers of the Society of Mary were sent by the Roman Catholic Church in the 19th century to evangelise New Zealand and several Pacific islands. Vibaud was one of about 25 Marist Fathers who left France between 1838 and 1903 to convert the indigenous peoples of New Zealand to Christianity and to instruct them in the Catholic faith. These 'Māori missionaries' were “a mostly invisible component which contributed to the development of New Zealand's national character”, (O'Meeghan, 1992, p. 39) but their invisibility was partly a result of a Marist code - 'L'ignoti et occulti' [\[2\]](#)- requiring its followers to

“maintain a low profile lest personalities impede the message of the Gospel” (Michael O’Meeghan, 1992, p.44). A number of external factors have also contributed to this obscurity: firstly, New Zealand’s historic links with France have been overshadowed by its even stronger links with Britain, and by the subsequent dominance of Protestantism. Secondly, Catholicism in New Zealand is often associated with the Irish soldiers, settlers and priests, who flooded in as a result of British settlement in New Zealand. Thirdly, a number of texts in French and Māori written by and about New Zealand missionaries were sent to French and Roman archives before New Zealand became a Province; these texts and others located in the Wellington Marist Archives have not yet been translated nor published and therefore remain inaccessible to the predominantly English-speaking population in New Zealand today.

Through the translation and analysis of these documents, we might produce a more complete picture of the religious, social and economic situation in 19th and early 20th century New Zealand. The aim of this paper is neither to praise nor to denounce the French, the Catholics, and the missionaries; it is to explore a different perspective on our history, and to shed light on historical figures who underwent enormous hardship and who made significant contributions to Māori at a time when it was believed that the Māori were a dying race [3] and that Europeans had unquestioned supremacy.

A man with a mission



Conditioned by the Society of Mary and the Roman Catholic Church, Jean-Marie Vibaud came to New Zealand in 1903 with the intention of converting the Māori people to Catholicism. Though the period 1830 to 1870 is unarguably a turbulent in New Zealand cultural history, it was an almost romantic era for young men and women hoping to make a difference in the world by tending to souls that were, in their eyes, in need of ‘saving’. The romantic missionary era glorified France as a great civilising power; in an early manuscript attributed to Vibaud, France is described as “Good, generous, unbiased, chivalrous, heroic” (Vibaud, date unknown: b, p. 4).

However, Father Vibaud had missed the encounter years by half a century, and the New Zealand he entered in 1903 was not the mythical and mysterious southern territory that had attracted Europe’s attention with stories of pagan cannibals and murderous savagery. Nor did it always resemble the descriptions he and other French religious would have read in *The Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, which “brought to the fireside missionaries at home vicarious adventure, foreignness, excitement” (Munro, 1996, p.21). The Land Wars and subsequent confiscations had devastated the Māori, but by the early 20th century they were on the road to recovery and revival, and had a strong distrust of anything European.

What makes Father Vibaud interesting and important is his fascination for and perspective on Māori culture and spirituality. Vibaud was assigned to specifically Māori missions, and was thus termed a ‘Marist Māori missionary’. His religious formation had been a blend of the humble, modest values of the Society of Mary and the extravagance of Catholic architecture, ceremonies and props; as a roving missionary in Otaki and the Wanganui region, he quickly found himself disillusioned with mission work because he lacked the financial means to help Māori erect the necessary religious structures. He was also strongly discouraged by the anti-European attitude of many Māori towards missionaries.

Yet, while comfortable, well-resourced European parishes gradually drew the aging Marists away from the Māori mission, Vibaud remained loyal to the Whanganui River and Otaki Māori for more than two decades. As is stated in his obituary: “true to French Marist tradition, he dedicated his brilliance, not to the flourishing European parishes... but to the Māori Mission” (Goulter, 1939, 11); however, after 1929 failing health led to appointments as Parish Priest in Wanganui, Timaru and Christchurch, a position that would not require constant travelling.

Manuscripts

Vibaud began his mission work in Otaki, and in 1906 was transferred to Hiruhārama, also known as Jerusalem, on the Whanganui River where, in the 1860s, religious conflict had resulted in a violent battle between Catholic hapu and Hauhau or Pai Mārire followers. In 1909, while working on the Hiruhārama mission, Vibaud wrote a series of texts in French which he hoped would inspire readers back in France to donate funds to the Catholic mission in New Zealand. As part of my Masters thesis I produced the first English translation of his manuscript entitled 'La Mentalité religieuse des Maoris' (The Religious Mentality of the Maoris); I am presently working on translations of five other French texts written by Vibaud. 'La Mentalité religieuse des Maoris' describes core concepts in Māori spirituality, including tapu, mauri and atua, but Māori religious beliefs and mentality are covered more accurately in a number of other works [4]. The value of Vibaud's manuscript on religious mentality lies in the fact that it reveals a great deal about Father Vibaud's views, his own mentality, and the challenging cultural, religious and economic circumstances he faced in his first few years on the Hiruhārama mission.

Struggle

At the beginning of the 20th century the Māori mission was in a state of poverty according to Dean Pierre Regnault, the New Zealand Provincial from 1908-1913 [5]. Life as a Marist Māori missionary was lonely, tiring and deprived. Expected to travel from village to village, from hapu to hapu, these missionaries were often attracted to white parishes because they represented stability, familiarity, comfort and community. In a letter written in 1909, Father Vibaud explains that he will soon have debts, as the Māori community of Parekino wishes to build a school, but despite having made "heroic sacrifices" (Vibaud, 1909a, 3) as Vibaud puts it, they have only a quarter of the funds required, and the Catholic mission is expected to front up with the rest. He expresses in this letter his frustration at the economic situation of the Māori missions:

Last February, the white district was made into a separate parish with Father Maillard as priest. I stayed in charge of Jerusalem with an entirely Maori population. This has left me without resources. Considering the unpopularity into which 'racial feeling' has plunged the mission in New Zealand... I am unhopeful that I will receive any local aid (Vibaud, 1909a, 1).

To make matters worse, Father Vibaud, like his predecessors, was in rivalry with the other religious denominations, so that sectarian jealousy and conflict worked against their evangelising efforts. Vibaud describes the way Māori would decide which of the conflicting gods had "the greatest mana. An English settler supported the Protestant cause and an Irishman the Catholic cause. They came to blows. The Irishman came off worst. The spectators concluded from it the inferiority of the Catholic God and became Protestants" (Vibaud, 1909c, 15-16).

Interest in and dedication to the Māori was a common trait among the Marists, but there is an attitude conveyed in Vibaud's writings that sets him apart from many other Europeans in early 20th century New Zealand. Land wars and confiscations had contributed to the rise of numerous religious movements, such as Ringatū and Pai Mārire, which fused Māori traditional beliefs and Christian concepts. Vibaud understood the impact of these hybrid movements on Māori interest in the Catholic Church and its missions, and does not blame Māori in general for their rejection of the Catholic Church. He cites 'racial feeling' as a principal reason for the ostensible failure of the Marist Māori missions, but asserts that the anti-European attitude of Māori had resulted from "The bad examples set by the conquering race" (Vibaud, 1909c, 2). According to Vibaud,

The missionary in New Zealand has the great disadvantage of being the conqueror's vanguard. In the eyes of the native, to accept the missionary's religion is to accept the customs of the conquering people and to revolt against the latter is to revolt against Christianity (Vibaud, 1909c, 11).

Father Vibaud was nonetheless determined to overcome the financial, racial and sectarian obstacles in order to fulfil his duty as a Marist missionary, but his optimism was not without a sense

of burden: “The power of sympathy is immense and the responsibility of the faithful is tremendous” (Vibaud, 1909c, 19).

Pā Wiripo

Vibaud’s interest in Māori religion and culture developed into fascination and admiration; during his time as a missionary at Hiruhārama, he was invited to study at a wānanga in Kawhaiki, making him “probably the only European to participate in the traditional school of tribal knowledge of the Whanganui River tribes” (O’Meeghan, 1992, p. 63). A greenstone mere, presented to him by Tamatea, the tohunga at Hiruhārama, marked his ‘graduation’ from the wānanga and his acceptance by local Māori [6]. This may be seen as ironic since, in his 1909 manuscript on Māori religious mentality, Vibaud had compared tohunga to deceitful sorcerers who used black magic [7].

Yet this same manuscript revealed that Vibaud believed in reconciling Māori tradition with Christian faith: “To take root in the heart of the Maori, Christianity should not therefore appear to him as the negation of his *tapus* and *mauris* but indeed as a new form established by God” (Vibaud, 1909c, pp. 6-7). Vibaud’s writings reflect a desire to Christianise Māori, but at no time did he attempt to Europeanise them; this was perhaps a primary reason for his acceptance by Whanganui River Māori.

There does not appear to be a record of Vibaud’s time in Kaiwhaiki, either in French or English, but according to a contemporary Marist archivist Vibaud did not keep the notes he had made during his time at the wānanga. It is said that he had offered his notes to a chief at Kaiwhaiki as a symbol of gratitude for the knowledge that had been shared with him, but the chief refused it saying that the knowledge he had gained was for him to keep. Vibaud then decided to give the knowledge back to where it had come from, the Whanganui River, and threw his notes into the water.

Some of the knowledge he gained was diffused through a monthly Catholic magazine that was printed entirely in Māori. The magazine *Whare Kura* was established in 1909 by a Marist missionary named Delachienne, and Father Vibaud took over as editor in 1916. Known as Pā Wiripo by *Whare Kura* readers, Vibaud kept the magazine in print until 1929. Editions comprised general news of interest to the Māori Catholic community and articles on religion, including “attempts to blend Maori and Christian theologies... Vibaud reflected a more tolerant view of traditional Maori spirituality than was the case with some of his missionary confreres” (Bergin, 1986, p. 107).

Conflict within the Marist Māori mission

In 1917, Vibaud’s letters to the Reverend Dean reveal a less naive outlook on the Māori mission. Requesting that he be made curate of a Wanganui parish that would include Māori as well as European Catholics, Vibaud states that Māori missionaries have been done an injustice; they are expected to cater to scattered Māori settlements with very few resources and no funding for the construction of churches and schools there. He writes to Father John Holley:

My love for the Maoris has not abated and what I am asking for..., far from hindering my Maori work, would make it more satisfactory to me... It would be more fruitful to the Maoris because the means at my disposal would be of a permanent nature, and instead of deepening the gulf between Maoris and Europeans, a precedent would be created whereby any idea of segregation or caste would be excluded to the great advantage of a true Catholic spirit (Vibaud, 1917, 1).

A comparison between Vibaud’s views in 1909 and 1917 reveals a change in approach towards the Māori mission, but an unflinching sense of disillusionment and discontent. Once eager for the Māori mission to stand independently, Father Vibaud now hopes for Māori and European Catholic communities to combine and share resources, just as he envisages a possible fusion of Māori and Catholic spiritual beliefs. However his optimism has abated somewhat, and the culpability he once placed on the European population in New Zealand has narrowed to the Superior of the Māori Mission and the Reverend Dean, to whom Vibaud appeals for the intermingling of the Māori mission and Pakeha parish in Wanganui.

Yet Jean-Marie Vibaud was only one of many Marist missionaries, all of whom would have had a different perspective and experience on the missions. I offer this paper thus as a bridge between my Masters thesis, which focused on the religious mentality of the Māori according to Vibaud and that of Vibaud himself, and the doctoral thesis I am currently working on: 'A Century of Struggle and Conflict within the Marist Māori mission'. There is a multitude of questions that have yet to be asked, let alone answered, with regard to the differences between the Marist Māori missions and the numerous other missions established in the Pacific over the last two centuries. The doctoral research I will carry out in New Zealand, France, and Rome, will generate a prosopographic analysis and in-depth comparative study of the Marist Māori missions and missionaries, whose perspectives and experiences we are compelled to explore if we are to gain a more balanced and complete understanding of New Zealand's religious, social and cultural history.

Acknowledgements: I could not have hoped to complete my Masters research and translation work without the unyielding support and guidance of Dr. Nathalie Philippe and Dr. William Jennings. It is their expertise and passion for the French language and missionary history that enables and inspires me to pursue doctoral study at the University of Waikato. I must also offer my gratitude to the Marist archivists in Wellington and in Rome for their invaluable knowledge and cooperation.

"Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives." See Lawrence Stone's *The Past and the Present* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981), p. 45.

[1] See J. Coste's *Cours d'Histoire de la Société de Marie*, p.157.

[2] See Archdeacon Walsh's 'The Passing of the Maori'.

[3] "Williams may have deliberately chosen terms that obscured the transfer of sovereignty in order to secure Maori agreement..." See Claudia Orange's *An Illustrated History of the Treaty of Waitangi*, pp. 24-26

[4] See Paul Bergin's 'The Mission among the Maori 1879-1920', in *The Society of Mary in New Zealand, 1838, 1889-1989*, edited by Peter Ewart, p. 35.

[5] See Sir George Grey's *Polynesian mythology and ancient traditional history of the New Zealand race, as furnished by their priests and chiefs*, and Bronwyn Elsmore's *Mana from Heaven*.

[6] See Paul Bergin's 'The Marist missions of Hiruharama and Otaki 1883-1914', p. 107.

[7] See Jean-Marie Vibaud's 'La Mentalité religieuse des Maoris', pp. 4-5.

REFERENCES:

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bergin, Paul. (1989) 'The Mission among the Maori 1879-1920' in *The Society of Mary in New Zealand, 1838, 1889-1989*, edited by Peter Ewart. Wellington: Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Mary.

Coste, J., S.M. (1965) *Cours d'Histoire de la Société de Marie: Pères Maristes 1786-1854*. Rome.

Dunis, Serge. (1984) *Sans tabou ni totem*. Paris : Fayard.

Dunmore, John. (1992) *The French and the Maori*. Waikanae: Heritage Press.

Elsmore, Bronwyn. (1999) *Mana from heaven: a century of Maori prophets in New Zealand*. Auckland: Reed.

Goulter, Mary Catherine. (1957) *Sons of France. A Forgotten Influence on New Zealand History*. Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs.

Grey, George. () *Polynesian mythology and ancient traditional history of the New Zealand race, as furnished by their priests and chiefs*.

Keys, Lillian G. (1968) *Philip Viard, Bishop of Wellington*. Christchurch: The Pegasus Press.

Keys, Lillian G. (1957) *The Life and Times of Bishop Pompallier*. Christchurch: The Pegasus Press.

King, Michael. (1997) *God's farthest outpost: a history of Catholics in New Zealand*. Auckland: Penguin.

Munro, Jessie. (1996) *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

O'Meeghan, Michael. (1992) 'The French Marist Maori Mission' in *The French and the Maori* edited by John Dunmore. Waikanae: Heritage Press.

Orange, Claudia. (2004) *An Illustrated History of the Treaty of Waitangi*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd.

Tolron, Francine. (2000) *La Nouvelle-Zélande : du duel au duo ? : essai d'histoire culturelle*. Toulouse : Presses universitaires du Mirail.

Walker, Ranginui. (1990) *Struggle Without End / Ka whaiwhai tonu matou*. Auckland: Penguin.

Walsh, Archdeacon. (1908) *The Passing of the Maori*. Wellington (originally published as 'Article XIII: The Passing of the Maori: An Inquiry into the Principal Causes of the Decay of the Race' in *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*, Volume XL 1907).

Wiltgen, Ralph M. (1979) *The Founding of the Roman Catholic Church in Oceania 1825 to 1850*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

MARIST ARCHIVES- ROME

APM Z 65 610 :

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (1917, April 18th) 'Letter to Father Holley'. Wanganui.

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (1909a) 'Lettre au Père Regis'. Wanganui River.

APM Z 060 :

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (1909b) 'La Santé des Maoris'. Wanganui River.

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (1909c) 'La Mentalité religieuse des Maoris'. Wanganui River.

MARIST ARCHIVES- WELLINGTON

DNM/17:

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (date unknown: a) Fr. Vibaud's Notebooks. Wanganui.

MAW-ACC210 :

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (date unknown: b) 'La France et les missions'.

MAW-DNM 17:

Bergins, Paul. (1986) 'The Marist missions of Hiruharama and Otaki 1883-1914'.

Goulter, Mary C. (1939, June) 'Our Honoured Dead', in *The Marist Messenger*.

MAW-HD6 :

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (date unknown: c) 'Esquisse historique de la Mission Maorie dans le diocèse de Wellington'.

Vibaud, Jean-Marie. (1909d) Lettre au Chanoine. Wanganui River.