

WHY
Pākehā
NEED TO
KNOW WHO
THEY ARE

Belonging in Aotearoa
New Zealand.





Within our churches in recent times, there have been discussions around what it looks like for Māori to relate to God as Māori, within a Pākehā-dominant culture. There is an ongoing need for reconciliation between Māori and Pākehā, particularly around the issues of restitution and power sharing. But amidst this we must consider the associated need for Pākehā to understand who they are and how they belong in Aotearoa New Zealand. Dr Alistair Reese considers why this is.

Why does understanding your identity matter?

People need to know who they are and how they belong for a variety of reasons. We live and operate out of the understanding of our identity, and significantly for social cohesion, identity influences the way we relate to each other. When identity is confused, not only does it bring a personal insecurity but it also colours our view of others. Identity insecurity often means that we feel threatened by the prosperity and development of another person or group.

As I have travelled presenting some of the social justice issues of Māori, including loss of land and culture, my expectation had been that Pākehā would respond with a desire to see justice and the restoration of Māori loss. And that does happen to some extent, but what I also hear is a sense of Pākehā insecurity about their identity and place of belonging. So, counterintuitively, although Pākehā ‘enjoy’ the political, social, and economic advantages of a dominant people, in the deep area of identity, we are insecure and somewhat challenged. Some scholars have termed this the ‘Pākehā

existential dilemma.’ I believe this has caused limitations in the Pākehā support of Māori identity and pursuit of reconciliation.

Why are Pākehā confused about their identity?

To begin to understand this, we need to recap some of the history since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.

For new settlers to New Zealand, Europe tended to be referred to as the homeland for many generations. Europe informed their view of history and the Pākehā identity strongly depended on that connection. This Euro-centric perspective limited the formation of an identity narrative which might have reflected the new environment. In addition, the process of colonisation often saw Māori encouraged, by the Crown and some Māori, to assume a ‘white exterior.’ Māori put their own cultural identity in the background and adopted a European persona in terms of language and culture, in order to make ‘progress’ in the new world.

These perspectives began to change around the 1960s. With the formation of the European Economic Community in the 1960s, New Zealand no longer had preferential treatment in trade and the security of the connection to Europe began to be eroded. The cultural shifts and civil rights movements of the 1960s set a foundation for what is termed in some quarters as the ‘Māori renaissance’ of the 1970s and 1980s. This included the increasing awareness that it was good and right for Māori to be Māori. The Treaty emerged again from a period of neglect within the national consciousness, and with it the associated recognition that Māori are the tangata whenua (people of the land).

Jettisoned by changes in the ‘homeland’ of Britain and challenged by Māori discontent to be assimilated into a European view of reality, Pākehā identity was challenged in a land where they had presumed to have dominance. Pākehā began to ask the question: “Who are we and how do we belong here?”

How can the Treaty help Pākehā know who they are?

It is generally accepted that the Treaty of Waitangi is an opportunity for Māori to address their identity, some of their needs, and some of the injustices they have incurred as a result of colonisation: the Treaty clearly identifies Māori as tangata whenua with rights and responsibilities that go with that.

But the Treaty is also an identity opportunity for Pākehā. Judge Edward Durie summed it up well in 1989 at Waitangi by saying: “We [Māori] must not forget that the Treaty is not just a Bill of Rights for Māori. It is a Bill of Rights for Pākehā too. It is the Treaty that gives Pākehā the right to be here. Without the Treaty there would be no lawful authority for the Pākehā presence in this part of the South Pacific... We must remember that if we are the tangata whenua, the original people, then the Pākehā are the tangata tiriti, those who belong to the land by right of that Treaty.”

On this basis, the Treaty affords Pākehā an identity and as Durie implies the Treaty also provides a pathway to belong to the land at a deeper level.

How can the Treaty help Pākehā belong in this land?

Metaphors are helpful in illuminating concepts and in my view the marriage metaphor is worthy of exploration when talking about the Treaty relationship. Of course it is only an analogy but it can



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help us to understand some of the potentialities.

In a marriage, each person has certain rights. But rights are not the heart of a marriage. The heart of a marriage is intimate relationship. One pathway to this way of relating is the preferencing of the other, the honouring of the other, with a desire to see the other prosper.

In relating this metaphor to the Treaty, we acknowledge that the Treaty is partly about rights, but that it is actually about more than rights. From the very beginning, Māori and the Crown talked about the Treaty in covenantal terms. This elevates the Treaty to more than rights talk and acknowledges that the Treaty is primarily about relationship. So in seeking this relationship, as Pākehā, I ask, "What is best for Māori?" For example, I want to see Māori flourish in their language and in the way they see the world. I would like Māori to have a platform with liberty to be fully who they are.

I could approach this legalistically. But as New Zealand Christians, we can understand something of the divine protocols of God. This includes the concept of honour. So as Pākehā, my response is to honour tangata whenua as I see elders honoured in Scripture. From this position of vulnerability, I honour Māori, not because there is something better about Māori but because there is something appropriate for me that when Māori and Pākehā are together, I take my lead from Māori.

Practically, this concept of honour will include a willingness to become familiar with Te Reo Māori (Māori language) as well as tikanga (the Māori way of doing things), preferably within settings that might be described as Te Ao Māori (the Māori world).

This is in contrast to the way we are used to operating and challenges our dominant cultural position.

But it isn't an imposition of one culture on another; it is a beautiful way of doing life together, from which we are able to learn and develop a shared identity and move towards a greater civility.

Importantly, this is not out of a desire to flatter or appease, but from a two-way exchange that is grounded in the confidence and security of equality stemming from who I am as tangata tiriti.

Closing thoughts

Identity configurations are complex, and of course more nuanced than the above generalised discussion has allowed.

However given that, I conclude that discussions of what it means to be a Pākehā New Zealander in the 21st century are important. The adoption of careless identifiers will only repeat some of the colonising tendencies of the past and threaten the fragile and precious relationships which were formalised and consecrated in 1840.

Pākehā are gifted an identity in the Treaty, but with this comes a concomitant responsibility. As I mentioned, rights are part of the Treaty. But before we work on translations and interpretations, we need to be 'sitting at the table' in relationship, getting to know each other, listening, and hearing. There will be differences, including the challenge of negotiating our different worldviews. However, the beauty of the covenant is that we are committed to working through our differences with an understanding that there can be unity without the loss of identity. From this vantage we are then able to unpack the details of the Treaty. The appropriate time for this is when we know something of the heart of the other. Otherwise we will be talking loaded political terms that are attempts to out-argue each other. It's not that we shouldn't talk about these complex aspects, but

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Story: Dr Alistair Reese

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TAKE OUTS!

1. How do you consider your identity in Aotearoa New Zealand?
2. How do you view the Treaty? Do you see it as a document about rights, relationship, or both?
3. How well do you engage in the bicultural journey?