

Spirituality and the secular university¹

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Abstract

The role of the secular university as ‘critic and conscience of society’ is enshrined in New Zealand legislation. But to what extent have universities practised this with reference to spirituality? Maori spirituality has made an important contribution to the social and political landscape of New Zealand. Maori academics may point the way forward in terms of addressing the resurgence in spirituality occurring in these traditionally secular bastions.

Keywords

Chaplaincy in higher education, New Zealand, secular university, spirituality, Te whare tapa wha.

WHAT IS A SECULAR UNIVERSITY?

The origins of the university were inextricably linked with spirituality - in particular a Christian perspective. The first universities were set up by the church with theology as a central discipline in the curriculum. However, recent centuries have seen the progressive erosion and marginalisation of spirituality as the university responded to the scepticism of modern Western society.

The open challenge to spirituality in the face of advances in science and technology led many in the West to either privatise their faith or withdraw completely from the spiritual side of life. The grand claim of modernity was that all could be explained by science and technology which would provide humanity with the utopia it craved. This claim eventually replaced the sacred as source of “truth and life.” Latin phrases on the insignia of some of the world’s oldest and most prestigious universities (e.g., University of Cambridge *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra* “From here, light and sacred draughts³”, University of Oxford *Dominus Illuminatio Mea* “The Lord is my Light” – a direct quote from Psalm 27, and Princeton University *Dei sub numine viget* “Under God's power she flourishes”) became increasingly antiquated and irrelevant statements from a bygone age. The truly secular University had emerged in which a firm wedge was driven between faith and scholarship.

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³ ‘Light’ and ‘sacred draughts’ are metaphors for knowledge and wisdom

NEW ZEALAND AND THE SECULAR UNIVERSITY

New Zealand, unlike its older North Hemisphere counterparts, has a far more limited university history, most being founded in the last century. The mottos of our Universities present a pragmatic reflection of the culture: “By natural ability and hard work” (Auckland), “Dare to be wise” (Otago) and “Let knowledge flourish” (Massey).” What is significant in New Zealand is the wording of the Education Act regarding the purpose of the university.

“...that universities have all the following characteristics...:

- i) they are primarily concerned with more advanced learning, the principal aim being to develop intellectual independence;
- ii) their research and teaching are closely interdependent and most of their teaching is done by people who are active in advancing knowledge;
- iii) they meet international standards of research and teaching;
- iv) they are a repository of knowledge and expertise;
- v) they accept a role as critic and conscience of society.”

NZ Education Act 1989, 162: (4) a

While critical thinking, freedom of expression, research and research-informed teaching are key functions of any university, what is interesting here is the inclusion of an explicit role for the universities with respect to broader society.

RECENT INFLUENCES IN SOCIETY ON NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITIES

Maori academics have made a significant contribution to social consciousness in New Zealand regarding the place of spiritual wellbeing. The Whare Tapa Wha model (see Figure 1) is used extensively in schools, hospitals, prisons and Universities. Inspired by their Maori colleagues, Pacific Island academics are raising awareness of the role of spirituality in the lives - including tertiary education - of Pacific peoples. Thus we see university staff fulfilling the role of critic and conscience in society and to the secular university itself with respect to the place of spirituality in life.

The Whare Tapa Wha model

This model of wellbeing was devised by Massey University’s Professor Sir Mason Durie in 1982. An analogy is drawn between the life of the person and a home (whare) where major structural components are compared to four aspects of human wellbeing. The rear wall represents mental and emotional, the side walls physical, the roof social and the entrance spiritual. If any of the four components is missing or damaged there is an effect on a person’s wellbeing. I find it significant that in Durie’s model the spiritual constitutes the entrance to the whare and hence the person.

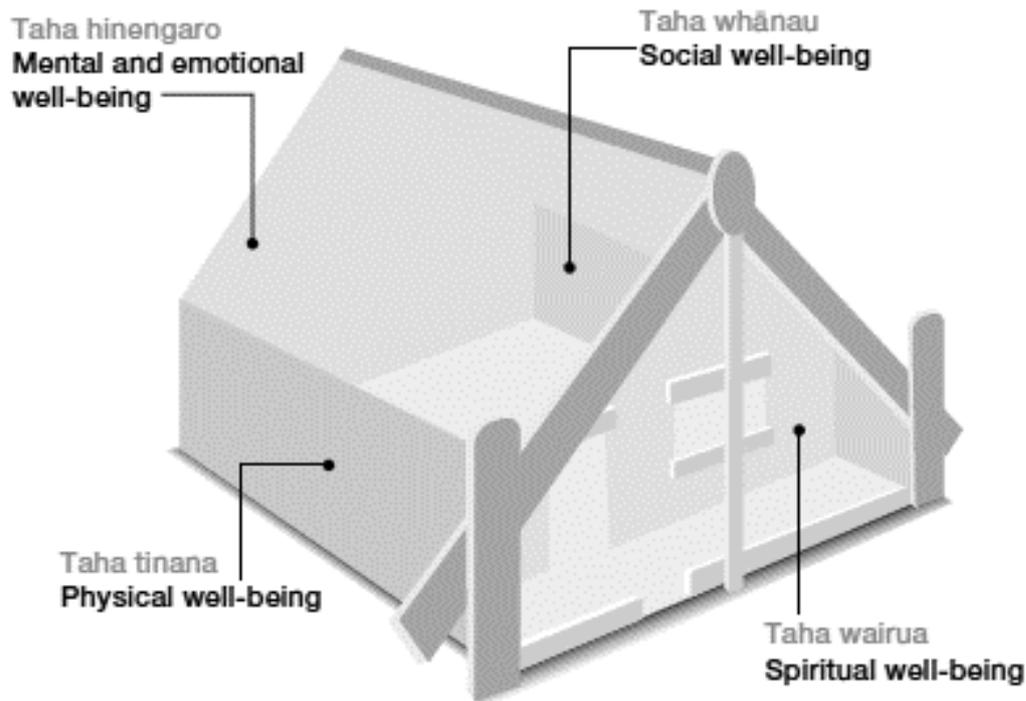


Figure 1. *The Whare Tapa Wha* model of wellbeing. Illustration from *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum*, published by Learning Media for the Ministry of Education, copyright © Crown, 1999. Used by permission.

Addressing Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori) relations, in terms of biculturalism, is an important part of the social and political landscape. Recent increases in immigration of Pacific Island and Asian peoples mean virtually all New Zealanders now talk about this country as being multicultural. This has brought a rich diversity to society and university life. At the university this has been augmented by the presence of thousands of international students. For example, of the 8000 students at Massey University, Palmerston North in 2010 at least 1000 (15%) were international students. The Palmerston North campus has a Muslim prayer centre and a diverse range of religious groups and clubs. The face of New Zealand society and its universities is changing, and with it expectations for racial, ethnic and religious inclusion and tolerance.

Also, the influence of post-modern thinking on the secular university in New Zealand should not be underestimated. Although many of the philosophical drivers of post-modern thought were European, its impact has reached the shores of this Antipodean country, including its university lecture theatres. There is a growing distrust of institutions, including the church, and a willingness to consider alternative narratives that seek to explain or shine light on the big questions of life. To accommodate its diverse clientele the university is, once again, having to recognise the existence and role of the spiritual.

END OF THE COLD WAR?

For decades many in academia have greeted spirituality with a suspicious, even dismissive attitude. However, with cultural shifts mediated by the influence of multiculturalism and post-modern thinking, there appears to be an emerging openness and acceptance of spirituality as part of a holistic university experience. Significant scepticism is still encountered in certain disciplines but the overall

trend is a warming in relations between the spiritual and the secular in the university environment. In 2005 the chaplaincy at Massey University, Palmerston North conducted a survey to research the degree of spiritual interest among students. The results were published in the student newspaper along with contemporary comment on trends in New Zealand society:

During the first two weeks of the academic year a survey was conducted to gauge the spiritual interest of tertiary students in Palmerston North. Members of the Chaplaincy, Christian campus groups and local churches carried out the survey. A total of 1462 students filled out surveys, most from the Turitea campus. So what were the results? Two-thirds (65%) believe there is a God, 20% that there is no God and 15% that there are many gods. Nearly half (48%) of students surveyed were interested in the spiritual side of life, 21% considered themselves to have a relationship with God, while a third (30%) have no interest in the spiritual. 13% of students wanted to find out about a campus Christian group or local church, while 14% were interested in exploring how to know God, who Jesus is and God's purpose for their life.

So how do these results compare to recent national surveys? A Herald digipoll conducted on January 7 posed the following question: "Do you believe in God?" 68% said "yes", 26% "no" with 6% undecided. So how do students and the average Kiwi compare to our political leaders? In a fascinating article on March 27 The Sunday Star Times asked the leaders of the major parties what they thought about God, prayer, church and Easter. The conclusion was our leaders are predominantly secular in their worldview - at odds with mainstream New Zealand. A One News Colmar Brunton Poll was also conducted in March to investigate church attendance and Easter. Over half (54%) of respondents never go to church while 16% attend on a weekly basis. 70% said they would not attend church at Easter while only 28% intended to. Peter Lineham, Associate Professor of History at Massey Albany, has summed up the dichotomy between spiritual interest and church attendance: "the new mood doesn't like the word religious, but it does like the words 'spiritual' and 'values'."

Chaff April 14, 2005

AN ENLIGHTENED RE-ENCHANTMENT?

Is it possible to see some form of integration between academic pursuit and spirituality? Both sides need to be prepared to examine their underlying presuppositions in the present and acknowledge unhelpful excesses in the past. For example, modern scepticism and the secular university were responses to an overly superstitious medieval period where institutionalized religion also played an overly dominant and, at times unjust and immoral, role in society.

On the other side of the coin, the utopian dream of a godless heaven on earth, coupled with a certain level of intellectual imperialism, while providing impressive progress in the quality and longevity of physical life, has come up short in terms of meeting all human needs and desires. It was this disenchantment that led to the emergence of the post-modern period in which we now live. It is not a question of throwing out all the good things that modernity has brought us. Advocating a return to pre-modern times is unrealistic and unhelpful. Neither is it appropriate to dismiss spirituality out of hand. The French scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal encapsulated the inadequacy of either of these polar positions regarding the human condition: "Man is neither angel nor brute."

Maybe at the leading edge of a new millennium the secular university will become a place where the question of what it means to be body, mind and soul can be explored in a more balanced way than has been the case in the last 100 years.

Could it even provide recognised forums in which the nature and role of spirituality, and the underpinnings of different belief systems, can be explored? And what does it mean for the New Zealand university to act as critic and conscience to society on this particular issue?

The way forward is to conduct ourselves with integrity and openness where we take all that is good in terms of critical thinking and freedom of expression and apply it to the dialogue between these two complementary realms of knowing and being. Maybe from this starting point there will come 'more light and sacred draughts'.

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