

He Kauhau mō Rota Waitoa

Matua Victor Mocaraka

Not a lot of detail is left to us about Rota Waitoa the first Māori to be ordained. There is much, though, that we can infer from the way he met the challenges of his times.

He came here to the “Native Boys School” at St Johns, listed as a Lay Associate in 1846. Lay Associates were students not considered to have the ability for higher studies but who would benefit from “useful arts.” We know that it has been the fate of many Māori in the New Zealand education system to be routinely steered to technical subjects and away from academic subjects. A fairly recent article in the NZ Herald, cites the Director of Multiple Pathways at Manukau Institute of Technology who said:

"We have too many students now who end up with a supermarket-style NCEA," "They wander through the aisles picking goods off the shelf. That is not the way to get a balanced diet".

Neither analysis nor solution ensues in the article.

The supermarket browsers referred to are brown and their choices are caused by the historical negativity of their educational experience and their consequent low self-expectations.

We can never know if Rota Waitoa was directed towards the “useful arts” purely because this option best reflected his natural abilities. To believe this we would also have to believe that St. Johns was an intellectual and cultural oasis in a wilderness of colonial racism.

Māori and other minorities too often encounter teachers who equate the limitations of a student’s English with limitations of the student’s intelligence thereby displaying the limitations of their own intelligence. Being trained in a foreign language would be but one of the challenges faced by Waitoa as a learner. The advantage of hindsight allows us to question this assessment of Waitoa’s intellectual capacity.

Towards the end of the 1840s the Church Missionary Society put pressure on Bishop Selwyn to ordain a Māori and Rota was seen as the best of the candidates. One, Archdeacon Abraham, wrote that Selwyn harboured doubts about the depth of Waitoa’s conversion and once expressed a fear that Waitoa would, “...slip back into his Māori ways.”

I recall from a young age how racist language could be used openly. I heard expressions such as “Gone back to the mat” or gone back to the Pah which were sneering expressions that suggested that a preference for Māori Tikanga was, inevitably, backward. This deep distrust of the other and particularly of the native is part of the colonial mindset and is still with us today. Selwyn was a loving mentor to Rota Waitoa and was a caring presence in his final illness. He was also

immersed in the racism of his time and place. Even Governor Grey, that architect of violent colonialism, was exasperated by the lack of progress the church was making in ordaining Māori clergy.

When he was finally examined for ordination to the diaconate in 1853 it was an emotional ordeal and Rota cried several times during it. Not only was the young student challenged by an alien language and culture but he also endured the pain of being mistrusted without cause (Being Māori is not a legitimate cause for mistrust) Nevertheless, Rota satisfied the examination requirements and this persuaded Selwyn to ordain more Māori. So Waitoa is rightfully seen as a pioneer. “Te Mātāmua o nga minita Māori”, reads the inscription on his tombstone.

In the years after the signing of the Treaty Waitoa expressed his grief at the violent assault of his people at the hands of the settler government. In a letter to Selwyn he said, “ My heart is is heavy, the Governor is pushing the people too hard over the land.”

He showed the same sympathy for the Hauhau when they were defeated by government forces and their allies even though these allies were his friends and benefactors. He displayed the disinterested compassion of a pure heart.

Over these years his love of his own suffering people was never in doubt. At the same time, though, he maintained his faith that Māori could only be resurrected through the saving actions of Christ. To this end he pleaded with Williams to ordain more Māori priests to nurture more church communities.

During this time Waitoa also took Archdeacon Charles Abraham through Taranaki to explain to him the Māori view of whenua. This tells us something very significant about Waitoa: He believed in the efficacy of education; he believed in the power of reason to change human behaviour.

This picture of Waitoa is hardly consistent with the view of him as one not suited to higher learning. His is a correct view of education it does have that power – provided, of course that political conditions allow education to take place.

Waitoa’s mission in Kawakawa was highlighted by his relationship with the great Ngati Porou chief Te Houkāmau. Initially the chief treated Waitoa with contempt and cruelty which must have been very painful for Rota’s wife and children. He would scatter and kill his stock, order him to move his garden as soon as he had planted it.

These and other humiliations he was subjected to are somewhat reminiscent of the sufferings of the Apostles described by Paul in 2 Corinthians. Waitoa went on encouraging his people in the face of these provocations, always behaving with Christian charity. To his credit, Te Houkāmau, overcome with admiration for the courage and devotion of Waitoa, was ultimately baptised by him and became his ally and close friend.

What grief Waitoa must have suffered because of the deep rift in his community: The Christians under Te Houkāmau with Waitoa at his side adopted an accommodationist policy towards the

government and fought their Hauhau relatives, many of whom were disaffected Christians, taking up arms against settler aggression. Rota was keenly aware of the degradation and pain suffered by the Hauhau.

As a Māori he knew their cause was just but equally he knew the deadful cost in Māori lives in opposing the government. More importantly though he had an unambiguous, uncomplicated view of Christ's command to love. This aspect of his character was commented on by his teachers at St Johns who commented on his, "lack of guile and his sincerity." How does such a one deserve mistrust?

Pākeha missionaries withdrew from the East Coast having failed to dissuade the people from joining the Hauhau movement. Rota stayed on even after being driven out of his station by the Hauhau chief Ngakopa Te Ahi.

Rota Waitoa was priested by Bishop William Williams in 1860 after an extensive probation as a Deacon in which he studied New Testament Greek under Sir William Martin. He travelled much throughout the district encouraging and rebuilding his Christian flock. One one of these trips in 1866 he was thrown from his horse and suffered an aneurism of the heart from which he died.

A colleague and Anglican priest explained to me that while in the Western Tradition today's gospel is about a doubting Thomas the Eastern Tradition presents us a Confessing Thomas. I think the highest confessional standard is that confession given wholeheartedly and maintained consistently even under great duress.

When Rota Waitoa was doubted, mistrusted, bullied and abused, colonised, tossed out of his mission station he would have no doubt been saddened, distressed but he behaved his entire life as if none of this detracted from his core mission of confessing Christ. Whether he doubted along with Thomas we will never know but the witness of his life tells us that along with Thomas his heart must have uttered every day, 'My Lord and my God.