



Are Christian karakia appropriate for state schools?

David Hines © 3 July 2022

Introduction

Usually when I preach in church it's because I've done some homework on a subject and think it might be useful to other people. Today I'm in the opposite situation. I've done a survey on Christian karakia. But the problem is more complicated than I realised, so I would appreciate your input before I come to a firm conclusion. As a second step, I would like to take your conclusions to other groups, such as atheists, Jews and Muslims, and then to the government.

My first impressions of my survey were that Christian programmes were declining

I found that

- a) the number of schools with **Religious Instruction sessions** (Bible in Schools) had dropped to 16%, a third of what it was in 2012.
- b) The number using Christian songs in their assemblies had dropped to 8 percent. Though I didn't survey religious assemblies when our Secular Education Network campaign started in 2012 because I didn't know they existed.
- c) I wasn't surprised that 90% of schools now have karakia. But I was pleasantly surprised that only 18% of schools used **Christian** karakia. That doesn't sound like a big figure.

But then I saw the other side of the coin

- d) **Eighteen** percent of schools doing Christian karakia is **more** than the number doing religious instruction, about 250 schools. So Christian karakia are now the **most widespread** Christian programme, **and that's on top of the 16% still doing RI. And** - if you add in schools that have religious songs and prayers in their assemblies, we have a total 42% of schools doing Christian-biased programmes of one kind or another And that is more than what we counted in 2012.

e) For those of us who believe in secular education, we have taken two steps forward and one giant step back.

At the same time, I've been getting hands-off messages

People saying don't mess with karakia; leave Maori culture alone. That comes not from Maori groups, but from other groups who support the Maori culture revival we've been seeing over the last 40 years ... culminating in Matariki becoming a public holiday just two weeks ago. This is not a popular time to be criticising karakia.

My first awareness that this might happen hit me in 2016, when The Secular Education Network was in mediation with the **Ministry of Education**, trying to get Christian programmes out of our school assemblies. A group of about six of us were there, and we quoted guidelines that the Ministry itself proposed in 2006. The ministry agreed with us on most issues including prayers in school assemblies, but they added they would want an exception for Karakia. I wondered why.

A few months later I was speaking with a Jewish leader who said he would not support guidelines about karakia until it had the support of Maori. At that stage we had not consulted Maori. I wondered why Jews were supporting Christian Maori.

I realised I did need to consult Maori views, if only to keep the Jews happy. So about two years ago, I tried to get three Maori culture academics to comment. This took a few months, each step I was waiting for one expert who ended up saying they were not the best person for the job. Eventually I gave up.

Our mediation with the Ministry failed ... I was never told why, but I believe the Minister of Education at the time, Hekia Parata from the National government was against it.

The subject of guidelines was revived by the Labour government. They held a public consultation. then in 2019 they published guidelines to make schools be more careful how they handle religious instruction. **But at the same time they said the guidelines didn't cover karakia, because it was not clear whether they were religious or not.**

There were even a number of atheists on the Secular Education network who advised us to take no action, on the basis that it was contrary to Maori rights under the Treaty of Waitangi. One member who dared to question why Maori should get special rights was given a roasting, and then his post was deleted, and he resigned.

So there is support for Christian karakia from surprising sources.

So last year, just before I started this survey, I asked the Ministry of Education for a **copy of the advice they received when they printed those guidelines comments about karakia three years ago**. They replied that they **didn't get** any advice!! All this defence of karakia, with still no evidence.

This ended my patience. A way forward was suggested by my daughter Karen, who is a teacher. She told me her school uses karakia **in consultation with local iwi**. So I wrote to the chair people of all the iwi about a dozen of them. I was aware there must be others, so I also wrote to the iwi chairs association to ask them to send me examples of the karakia they would recommend to schools, and I got just **one** iwi which replied... Ngai Tahu.

I felt like throwing this in the rubbish, because it was not representative of the whole country ... but I'm glad I didn't because I realised:

I had another potential source of Maori views

The survey itself! So I added a bunch of questions about karakia.

- a) I figured the schools themselves are in touch with Maori students and their parents. So as well as asking whether they had karakia, I asked **whether they got the wording from the Ministry of Education, local iwi**, other sources. The answer was that iwi were one of the main sources, but others used members of their own staff who were proficient in Kaupapa Maori, even students were invited to lead. Some schools wrote their own. The Ministry had some sample karakia on their website, but this was not a major source.
- b) Then I took a bolder approach and invited the schools to send copies of the karakia they used, along with English translations. I was aware that some schools were hostile to my survey, and might well be hostile on this issue in particular. So I made this question optional. It was a pleasant surprise that 280 schools replied, which was heaps for my purposes.
- c) **So contrary to the bad vibes** I had been getting about karakia, a number of schools **wanted the public to know what they were doing** about this issue.
- d) I also gave them three boxes in the survey for them to print Traditional Karakia and three boxes for Christian karakia. **I left it to the schools to make that distinction, if they wished**. And they **did** wish. Only one school had a problem with the issue. That school said it was an insult to ask this question.

But all the other 280 schools were already were making this distinction themselves.

a)

So how can you tell what is a Christian karakia?

The examples make it quite clear. :

- a) The main clue is that they begin with E te Atua. Atua is the Maori word for god, **but**: It's a phrase only a Christian would use. Because only Christians (and Muslims) go round using the word God as name. And there were dozens of Christian karakia that used those words. By contrast, there were only **two** karakia that referred to the Maori gods, **and they don't use the word Atua**. They used the individual names of their gods, Tane, the god of the forest, Ranginui the father god of the sky, Papatuanuku, the mother god of the earth. And they didn't pray to these gods, they honoured and appreciated them.
- b) On the side, I had discussions about this with numerous atheists and **they did not object to the Maori gods, because nobody was pressuring anyone to believe in them. They were treating them as legends.**
- c) The other main clue to a Christian karakia is that most of them they quote the Bible. **Surely that proves they are Christian!** the most popular Christian karakia by far was the Lord's Prayer, with 30 schools using it. Second was what Christians call the Grace. Those three phrases are also sure signs of a Christian prayer, Atua for the Father, Ihu Karaiti for Jesus Christ, and Wairua Tapu for the Holy Spirit. And another bunch were prayers of thanks a meal, like Christians used to do before a meal.
- d) There were also several words unfamiliar to me ... honore ... which is a Maori transliteration of the Biblical word honour. And kororia for glory. These words were borrowed from English prayers and they also quoted the psalms, and I later discovered they are Ringatu karakia. Ringatu has published a book of these prayers, and they are being used by other Maori as well.
- e) The Ministry of Education's website for schools has small group of karakia for schools to use, including the Lord's Prayer.

What are schools doing with these Christian karakia?

The schools also offered extra views of their own in the numerous comment slots I put there, in case my questions didn't meet their needs.

I received about a hundred of them, mostly just for clarification, but several were significant:

- a) A group of them insisted that they do not use Christian karakia because of respect for non-Christian children of other religions.

- b) Others felt it was the right of the local iwi, or other leader to choose their own karakia.
- c) Others advised these iwi leaders to be more sensitive in the Christian karakia they use.
- d) Several said they didn't know Maori, so didn't know what kind of karakia are being used.

I found this helpful, but I still didn't have the **direct** Maori input we needed.

Then I got unexpected help from Maori teachers themselves

Then one of the Kaupapa Maori schools refused to complete the survey unless I had the words translated into Maori. I tried three translation firms to do it, but they all said no.

Then it dawned on me. This Maori school was the missing Maori advice. And all I needed was to find other Te Kura Kaupapa Maori schools, who had already answered. So I filtered my results by those two names, and came up with 40 kaupapa Māori schools who did not object to my survey, and had given full answers:

Their answers were hugely different from the rest of the population. They gave very low support for religious instruction, very high support for hymns in their assemblies, extremely high in the number of them that have karakia. And on the issue of Christian karakia, they were split down the middle. Exactly 50% of them use Christian karakia.

There are also many other schools with a majority of Maori on their rolls. This is part of the information the Ministry of Education puts on its contact list.

So I filtered my results and got a much larger sample:

- a) **There are 357 schools that have more than 50% of Maori students on their roll. A surprisingly large number**
- b) Only 34 of them have religious instruction. That is 9.5%. That's about half the number for our state schools as a whole.
- c) 71 of these schools have religious songs and prayers in their assemblies. That is 18.9%, more than double the number for our state schools as a whole.
- d) And 272 of them have Christian karakia, exactly 33% of them. So that is a very significant sample of Maori opinion. But still quite a low percentage.

You **cannot** say Maori schools are demanding to have Christian karakia. Because only a third of them are doing it themselves.

Finally, looking at the legal aspects:

- e) When our secular schools were set up in 1877... the very first issue to be raised was whether schools should be opened each day with a recital of the Lord's Prayer. So you could argue that this Christian karakia movement destroys the principles that parliament chose.
- f) **However**, those politicians in 1877 showed no awareness of the Treaty of Waitangi. Maori morale was low in those decades. The education system was supposed to be compulsory, but Maori were not obliged to send their children to school, so in hindsight we can say, that Maori children back then could have felt very lonely in a meeting that was not opened with karakia.
- g) **We also** need to acknowledge the right of Maori and everyone else to amend their culture.
- h) That is no reason to go completely in the opposite direction. The Bill of Rights Act is a two-edged weapon and sometimes it is necessary to balance conflicting rights.
- i) And sometimes it is necessary to use positive discrimination to lift the fate of a group that has been harmed.
- j) And Sometimes there is no single right or wrong answer, and we need to look for a consensus. This could be seen as one of those times.
- k) This general issue of religion in schools is already on the government's agenda. It includes religious instruction, and neutral education about all religions. There is no reason why we could not add Christian karakia to the discussion.
- l) So my discussion challenge is; as unitarians, do you believe it is appropriate for state state schools to use Christian karakia. Or do you think we should drop the idea.