

# Religious Trauma as Wairua Assault:

## Dimensional Autophagy, the Whakapapa Dilemma, and the Path to Covenantal Identity

A lived-experience-informed academic reflection

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### Abstract

Religious trauma syndrome refers to the psychological and spiritual harm that can occur when individuals are exposed to shame-based theology, spiritual abuse, or coercive religious environments. This paper explores a framework for addressing spiritual trauma while preserving authentic spiritual connection through the Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) model and its concept of wairua autophagy. Drawing on research on religious trauma (Winell, 2011), decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012), and Māori wellbeing frameworks (Durie, 1998; 2001), the paper proposes a nine-cycle process through which individuals may release imposed shame while retaining meaningful spiritual insight.

The paper introduces an additional dimension not widely addressed in existing literature: the **Whakapapa Dilemma**. This describes the experience of Māori and other Indigenous peoples who feel unable to legitimately claim Christian faith because their genealogy does not connect to the Abrahamic covenant described in Christian scripture. This dilemma represents a distinct form of faith-based trauma situated at the intersection of colonisation, identity, and theology.

By re-examining New Covenant theology, which emphasises inclusion beyond ethnic and genealogical boundaries, the paper suggests a pathway through which Indigenous spiritual identity and Christian faith may coexist without requiring cultural erasure. The analysis also draws on sociological theories of religious renewal movements (Wallace, 1956; Weber, 1978; McLoughlin, 1978) alongside Taylor Welch's contemporary articulation of transformation stages—Crisis, Consecration, Confrontation, Multiplication,

and Institutionalisation—which closely mirror the lived journeys of many Māori Christian practitioners navigating questions of belonging.

**Keywords:** *religious trauma, wairua, whakapapa, decolonisation, New Covenant, covenantal identity, Māori Christianity*

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## Introduction

Religious Trauma Syndrome refers to the psychological and spiritual harm that can occur when individuals are exposed to religious systems characterised by fear, shame, and conditional acceptance (Winell, 2011). Teachings centred on sin, punishment, and divine rejection can produce long-term emotional and spiritual distress.

For Indigenous peoples, religious trauma is often layered upon historical experiences of colonisation. In many contexts, traditional spiritual systems were suppressed while Christianity was introduced through political and cultural authority rather than voluntary encounter (Tinker, 1993). As a result, individuals raised within these traditions frequently face a difficult choice: rejecting religion entirely or maintaining a form of faith that remains associated with harm.

The **dimensional autophagy framework** within Te Poutama o te Ora proposes a third pathway. Rather than abandoning spirituality or accepting harmful religious narratives, individuals can critically process inherited beliefs and discard destructive elements that retain authentic spiritual insight.

However, for many Māori Christians, an additional challenge persists even after traditional religious trauma has been addressed. This paper refers to this challenge as the **Whakapapa Dilemma**.

Within the Māori worldview, whakapapa represents more than biological ancestry; it describes relational belonging within the structure of identity, community, and wellbeing (Durie, 2001). Identity is grounded in connection to tīpuna, whenua, and community.

When a person traces their lineage to ancestors such as **Porourangi** or **Rangatira Momo**, they stand within an ancient and legitimate whakapapa. Yet the biblical narrative describes a covenant beginning with Abraham and unfolding through the history of

Israel. For some Māori Christians, this creates a profound question of legitimacy: *Where do I stand within this story?*

This paper argues that the Whakapapa Dilemma should not be dismissed as a simple theological misunderstanding. Rather, it reflects the historical context in which Christianity was introduced in Aotearoa. Missionary activity was often intertwined with colonial governance and cultural assimilation (Binney, 1995). Consequently, the universal message of Christianity was frequently overshadowed by the political structures through which it was transmitted.

Healing from this form of spiritual trauma, therefore, requires both psychological processing and theological reconsideration. It involves recovering the universal implications of the New Covenant while acknowledging the historical realities of colonisation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Wairua within Te Whare Tapa Whā and Te Poutama o te Ora**

Within the Māori health model **Te Whare Tapa Whā**, wairua represents the spiritual dimension of wellbeing and is considered essential for holistic health (Durie, 1998). When this dimension is harmed through shame-based theology, spiritual abuse, or colonial religious imposition, healing must engage directly with the spiritual domain.

The Te Poutama o te Ora framework addresses this through the concept of **dimensional autophagy**, a process through which individuals metabolise harmful spiritual teachings while retaining genuine spiritual insight. Rather than rejecting spirituality entirely, individuals learn to distinguish between oppressive interpretations and authentic spiritual experience.

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## **The Whakapapa Dilemma as Faith Trauma**

This paper refers to this experience as the Whakapapa Dilemma. The Whakapapa Dilemma describes the experience where an Indigenous person questions their legitimate belonging within a faith tradition because their ancestral genealogy appears disconnected from the covenantal lineage within that faith, creating a tension between cultural identity and spiritual participation (I'Anson, 2026).

Traditional models of religious trauma focus primarily on fear, shame, and control dynamics within religious communities (Winell, 2011). The **Whakapapa Dilemma** differs in that it centres on questions of belonging rather than behaviour.

Three interconnected dynamics contribute to this dilemma.

### **Genealogical Exclusion**

Some interpretations of Christian theology appear to suggest that the covenant belongs specifically to the descendants of Abraham. For individuals whose whakapapa lies elsewhere, this can create a sense of spiritual exclusion.

### **Colonial Contamination**

Many Māori practitioners recognise that the form of Christianity historically presented to them was closely tied to colonial governance structures. This makes it difficult to separate the faith itself from the cultural and political systems through which it was transmitted.

### **Identity Fracture**

These tensions can produce a state of identity fragmentation. Individuals may feel disconnected from Māori cultural identity because of their Christian faith while simultaneously feeling excluded from Christian belonging due to genealogical difference. This experience resembles what Ngata describes as a form of **double exile**.

Neither conventional decolonisation approaches nor traditional pastoral care adequately address this complexity. Decolonisation frameworks may encourage rejection of Christianity altogether, while pastoral care frequently fails to acknowledge colonial trauma. Consequently, an alternative integrative pathway is required.

## **The New Covenant as Theological Resolution**

The New Testament directly addresses questions of covenantal inclusion. The letters to the Romans and Galatians examine whether non-Jewish believers may legitimately belong to the covenant community.

Paul argues that through Jesus Christ, the division between Jew and Gentile has been removed (Ephesians 2:14, KJV). The New Covenant does not function as an extension of ethnic privilege but establishes a new form of belonging available to all peoples.

Galatians 3:28–29 states that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek” and that those who belong to Christ become Abraham’s descendants through promise rather than genealogy.

For Māori Christians, this reframes the question of belonging. The issue is no longer whether one’s whakapapa connects biologically to Abraham, but whether participation in the New Covenant creates a new form of spiritual lineage.

Within Māori epistemology, this concept is not entirely unfamiliar. Whakapapa systems have historically incorporated mechanisms of adoption and relational inclusion. In this sense, New Covenant theology can be interpreted as extending similar relational principles on a universal scale.

## **Transformational Cycles of Spiritual Renewal**

Sociological studies of religious renewal movements describe patterns of crisis and transformation within communities (Wallace, 1956; Weber, 1978; McLoughlin, 1978). Contemporary writer Taylor Welch similarly describes a five-stage pattern of personal transformation:

1. Crisis
2. Consecration
3. Confrontation
4. Multiplication
5. Institutionalisation

For many Māori Christian practitioners navigating the Whakapapa Dilemma, these stages closely mirror the lived experience of reconstructing spiritual identity.

The dilemma often becomes most visible during the **Consecration stage**, when individuals are removed from institutional structures and forced to confront fundamental questions of belonging.

### **Religious Trauma in the Māori Context**

Several patterns of religious trauma appear across many faith communities. These include purity culture and sexual shame (Klein, 2012), fear-based teachings about hell, spiritual abuse within hierarchical leadership structures (Johnson & VanVonderen, 2005), and condemnation of sexual minorities.

Within Indigenous contexts, these experiences are compounded by colonial suppression of traditional spiritual systems (Tinker, 1993).

In Aotearoa, Christianity was frequently introduced alongside literacy, property law, and Crown governance structures. Accepting Christianity sometimes required adopting British cultural norms while distancing oneself from Māori spiritual traditions.

This created a paradox for many Māori Christians: the spiritual message may have been meaningful and transformative, yet the institutional vehicle through which it arrived was deeply entangled with colonial power.

The task of healing, therefore, involves distinguishing between the **spiritual message** and the **historical structures** that delivered it.

### **Conceptual Integration of Wellbeing and Identity**

The broader relationship between social determinants, wellbeing domains, and spiritual identity integration is illustrated in Figure I. The model adapts the *Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand: Ngā Tūtohu Aotearoa* wellbeing framework (Stats NZ, 2019) and overlays the Te Poutama o te Ora framework to demonstrate how wairua, identity, and whakapapa operate within wider social and cultural environments.

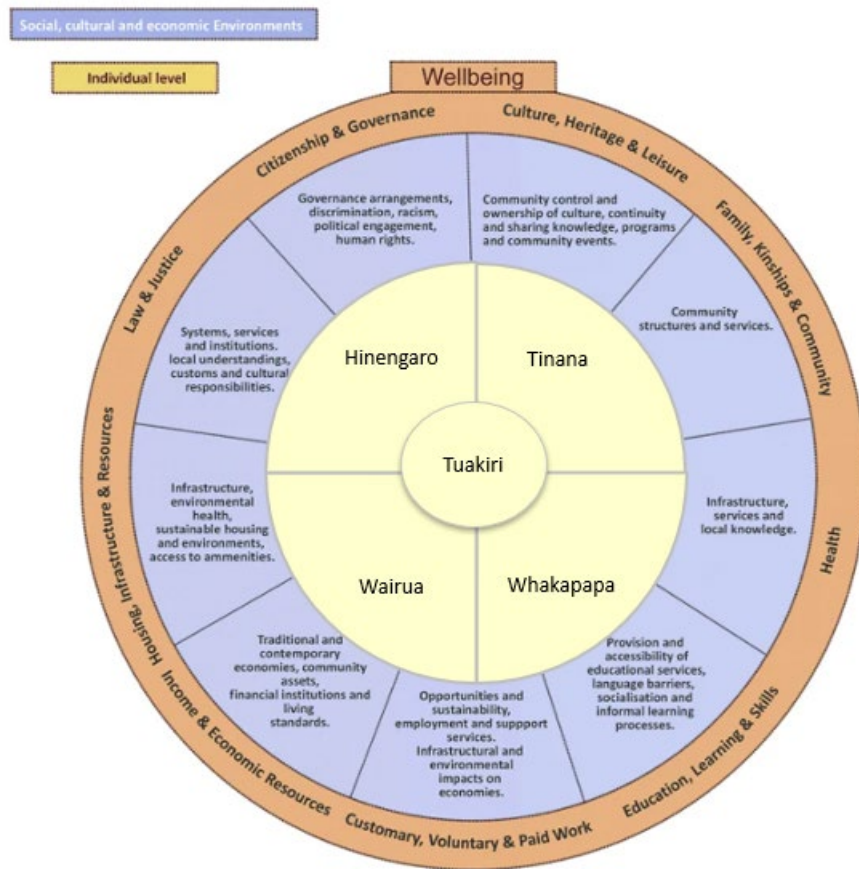


Figure I. Wellbeing domains framework adapted from *Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand: Ngā Tūtohu Aotearoa* (Stats NZ, 2019) and modified by I’Anson (2026). The adapted model positions Tuakiri (identity) at the centre, surrounded by the dimensions of Tinana, Hinengaro, Wairua, and Whakapapa, illustrating how identity mediates the relationship between wellbeing and wider social, cultural, and economic environments.

### Case Illustration: Navigating the Whakapapa Dilemma

The following case illustration demonstrates how the Whakapapa Dilemma may manifest in lived experience and how the wairua autophagy framework can support movement toward integrated spiritual identity.

The individual was a 62-year-old Māori woman who had spent 44 years working within corporate environments. She had been raised within the Anglican tradition and had maintained a personal Christian faith throughout adulthood. Despite this long-standing

commitment, she described carrying a persistent sense of spiritual uncertainty and frequently expressed the feeling that she might be an outsider within the very faith she practised.

Her whakapapa was clearly established. She could trace her ancestry through recognised Māori lines, including Porourangi on her maternal side and Rangatira Momo on her paternal side. These genealogical connections represented legitimate and deeply rooted cultural belonging. However, when engaging with Christian scripture, she encountered a covenant narrative that appeared to begin with Abraham and continue through the history of Israel. This raised a troubling question: if the covenant was genealogically grounded in Abraham's descendants, where did she stand within that narrative?

This tension intensified as she later became aware of the historical relationship between Anglican missionary activity and colonial governance structures in Aotearoa (Binney, 1995). The Christianity she had inherited was therefore not only spiritually meaningful but also historically entangled with the colonial context through which it had been transmitted. This awareness introduced an additional layer to the dilemma: not only did her whakapapa appear disconnected from the biblical covenant lineage, but the expression of Christianity she had received was associated with colonial power structures.

A significant turning point occurred following redundancy near the end of her corporate career. The loss of a long-held professional identity created a period of disruption and reflection that corresponds closely to what Welch describes as the Consecration stage, a period characterised by withdrawal from familiar structures and reassessment of foundational beliefs. During this time, previously suppressed questions regarding spiritual legitimacy surfaced with greater urgency.

Through sustained reflection and spiritual exploration, she began to reconsider the covenant narrative within the broader theological framework of the New Covenant. Rather than viewing the covenant as genealogically restricted to the Abrahamic lineage, she came to understand it as an inclusive relationship made available to all people through Christ.

Importantly, this reframing did not require the abandonment of Māori identity or whakapapa. Instead, it allowed both dimensions of identity to coexist without contradiction. Her Māori whakapapa remained intact and honoured, while her Christian faith was reinterpreted as participation in a covenant that transcends ethnic lineage.

From a clinical perspective, this process involved extending the wairua autophagy framework to include explicit theological reflection alongside the processing of colonial religious trauma. By distinguishing between the historical structures through which Christianity arrived and the theological message of covenantal inclusion, the practitioner was able to move from a sense of spiritual impostorship toward a more stable experience of belonging.

## **Conclusion**

Religious trauma within the Māori context often includes a dimension not fully captured by existing models: the Whakapapa Dilemma, the perception that one does not legitimately belong within the religious tradition one inhabits.

This dilemma emerges from the intersection of colonisation, identity disruption, and theological misunderstanding. Healing requires a dual process: the metabolisation of colonial religious trauma and the recovery of the inclusive vision of the New Covenant.

When these processes occur together, Māori practitioners need not choose between their whakapapa and their faith. Instead, both can coexist within an integrated spiritual identity.

Future research may further explore how Indigenous theological integration can contribute to culturally grounded approaches to spiritual trauma recovery within counselling practice.

In this sense, the aim of wairua autophagy is not the abandonment of faith, but the restoration of spiritual integrity — where tuakiri, whakapapa, and covenantal belonging can stand together without contradiction.

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