

# The mystery of the god Io

*Byron Rangiwai\**

In 1913, Percy Smith, the founder of *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, published findings on Māori religion that shocked experts in the colonial capital of London. This truth ‘hitherto unknown to Europeans’, which he translated from his source H.T. Whatahoro’s testimony, who himself learned it from a Māori priest fifty years earlier, was indeed stunning.

In *The Lore of the Whare-wānanga*, Whatahoro and Smith claimed that Māori tribes, long thought to be polytheistic, had once worshipped a Supreme God. They suggested that this creator of heaven and earth was believed to rule over the world, the minor gods and men, and that his name was Io.<sup>1</sup>

There were three potential issues with this claim.

The first was that this monotheistic deity mapped neatly onto the image of the Judæo-Christian God whose name had begun spreading throughout Māori tribes exposed to missionary influences.

The second was that Whatahoro, who collected the source material from two Māori priests, was a baptised Christian when he interviewed them. Even at the time, his reliability was questioned.<sup>2</sup>

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And the third was that few people had ever heard of Io. As the Māori scholar Te Rangi Hīroa noted, ‘the discovery of a supreme god named Io in New Zealand was a surprise to Maori and Pakeha alike.’<sup>3</sup>

These facts have fed an enduring controversy over the authenticity of the Māori god Io. This is a complicated and extensive debate. † Skeptics believe that Io was either an accidental or intentional colonial construct used to present Māori culture as semi-civilised to European audiences, because, it was thought, worshipping a Supreme God placed it on a higher rung of an imagined hierarchy of races. Māori believers, meanwhile, accept Io as their god, whether they identify him with the Christian faith, Māori tradition, or both.

In his book *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*, James L. Cox explores the literature on Io in great detail, from the perspectives of both Māori and Pākehā scholars.

I will not enter here into a debate about Io’s authenticity because, from a Māori theological perspective, hard definitions on spiritual matters are nonsensical.

For Māori, time is not linear but cyclical and is best understood metaphorically as walking backwards into the future.<sup>4</sup> As Roma Mere Roberts writes, this well-known aphorism ‘highlights the importance of seeking to understand the present and make informed decisions about the future through reference to the past’.<sup>5</sup> By looking back to the past, Māori gain insights about how to act in the present and navigate the future.

When Māori were introduced to the Bible, we made connections between ourselves and the stories and traditions of the ancient Israelites.<sup>6</sup> Our Māori prophets, who resisted colonisation and missionary Christianity by creating syncretistic religious movements, interpreted their situation through the lens of the Bible. Māori used the past—the biblical past in this case—to make sense of their present and future.

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† H.T. Whatahoro, ‘Io of the hidden face’, in *Synkrētic* №1 (Feb 2022): 189-204.

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Whether Io is an ‘authentic’ Māori god is therefore a debate for scholars only concerned with linear constructions of time. In his search for the ‘High God’ in indigenous cultures including Māori, for instance, James Cox concludes that

the debate over Io... is of principal concern to those who, either for ideological reasons...or from Christian theological motives, find it necessary to ‘invent’ a God with attributes similar to the Christian deity...for veiled and at times surreptitious purposes, which makes an alleged Māori belief in a Supreme Creator incidental to the predisposed underlying motives of those promoting the idea.<sup>7</sup>

From the purely empirical standpoint, Io’s authenticity has been heavily critiqued. However, Māori understandings very often fall outside the conventions of Western academia.<sup>8</sup>

For his part, the Reverend Māori Marsden, a priest or *tobunga* trained in the tradition of Io and an Anglican priest critical of Western academic approaches, maintained that only ‘Maori from within the culture’ can adequately ‘describe the main features of the consciousness in the experience of the Maori’.<sup>9</sup> For Marsden, an authentic approach to understanding the spiritual affairs of Māori—including the mysteries of Io—was closer to ‘poetic imagery’ than to ‘the empirical approach of the social anthropologist’.<sup>10</sup>

If we take the Māori theological approach of *Atuatanga* as our departure point, which accepts the divine as normal and valid, we will see the limits of the purely empirical debate on the existence and authenticity of Io.

The word *Atua* refers to an ancestor with continuing influence or a god, demon, supernatural being, deity, ghost, strange being or object of superstitious regard. The term *Atuatanga* is then created by adding the suffix *-tanga*, which designates the quality of the base noun. *Atuatanga* pertains to Māori theology and spirituality, whether one is referring to ancestor deities with continuing influence, *ngā Atua*, or the Christian God called *Te Atua*. I define *Atuatanga* quite simply as all things *Atua*.

The concept of God in any given society at any given time reflects that society. Whether he be real, invented, or the result of

religious syncretism, Io is as real as any object of perception to his believers. Moreover, concepts of God shift, change and evolve over time in all societies, adding another layer of richness to the debate over Io.

The Māori worldview is open and holistic. Our genealogy or *whakapapa* helps Māori to understand ourselves and the world around us. *Whakapapa*, which means “to layer”, is the basis for understanding our spiritual and physical place in the cosmos. It provides us with the foundation upon which we stand as Māori.

Māori life is understood in spiritual terms. Birth, life, and death are viewed as physical facets of spiritual life. Māori concepts such as *mana* (spiritual power), *tapu* (restriction), *noa* (free from restriction), *mauri* (life force), and *wairua* (soul) are part of everyday life for Māori.

Somewhat inaccurately referred to as the gods, *ngā Atua* reside and are active in the physical world. They are more accurately described as ancestor deities with continuing influence over particular domains. For example, Tangaroa is the *Atua* of the sea and Tāne is the *Atua* of the forest.<sup>11</sup> *Iwi* (tribes), *hapū* (clans), and *whānau* (families) also had specific *Atua*, as well as *kaitiaki* (custodians) and *taniwha* (monsters, guardians) that protected them and, conversely, punished people for breaching codes of behaviour. These entities could also be turned against one’s enemies.<sup>12</sup>

Māori history and theology begins with creation narratives that speak of emergence, growth, and separation. These narratives vary somewhat from *ivi* to *ivi*, but the dominant theme, as with other creation stories, is that of moving from darkness to light, from *Te Pō* to *Te Ao Mārama*.

Of the many different Māori creation narratives, there are three main ones in the literature: those concerned with Io, the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, and the creation of the first human being by *Atua*.

The notion of Io as a supreme *Atua* is a debatable one. Many scholars have argued that Io was a post-Christian invention and that ‘such a tradition is inauthentic as it was intentionally created in response to foreign ideas’.<sup>13</sup> Others have claimed that the Io narrative

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already existed in Māori society but that it was revived and adapted by some *tobunga* to resist Christianity's advances, focusing first on those ideas from Māori culture that most closely resembled those in Christianity.

Christianity was absorbed by Māori into the prevailing belief system, producing a uniquely Māori type of Christianity, which for some also includes the incorporation of the previous *Atua*. Some argue that, if Io was taught by *tobunga* and accepted by certain Māori communities at the time of contact with Europeans, then the tradition is authentic, since all traditions naturally evolve over time.<sup>14</sup>

In the present day, Io is still worshipped among Ngāpuhi *imi* in the far north of Aotearoa New Zealand and by a number of other tribes. In his works, Reverend Māori Marsden argued that Io was eternal and located in *Te Korekore*, which he described as a realm suspended between

non-being and being; that is, the realm of potential being. This is the realm of primal, elemental energy or latent being. It is here that the seed-stuff of the universe and all created things gestate. It is the womb from which all things proceed.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond its interest to scholars and believers, the Io creation story is brimming with theological, cosmological, and philosophical interest.

Io began creation through a 'process of genealogical recitation or naming'.<sup>16</sup> The creation process moved through a series of 'principal epochs': first the void (*Te Korekore*), then the abyss (*Te Kōwhao*), and finally night (*Te Pō*). Io then made the 'state of being' come into existence as a 'seed' in the abyss of non-being, which grew and expanded like a plant. Inside the seed, Io had placed a *mauri*, the life-force which caused its gestation through various stages of growth. This is what made the seed grow from a taproot (*Te Pū*) to a vine (*Te Aka*). It then moved into a new stage of seeking (*Te Rapunga*) that ended in that of elemental and pure energy (*Te Hihiri*).

Io then fashioned the realms of the subconscious (*Te Mahara*), which expanded into those of cognition and knowledge (*Te Whē*). He then exhaled the breath of life (*Te Hauora*) into the universe,

creating the corporeal world that paved the way for the earth, sky, and spirit world (*Te Ao Wairua*).

The primordial parents, Papatūānuku and Ranginui, clasped together in an unending embrace, had several offspring who lived in the dark realm between them. Their firstborn was called Tāne.<sup>17</sup> Io irritated the primal parents' children with the permanent darkness around them to stimulate their search for the light.<sup>18</sup> Resenting that the world was pitch black, Tāne pushed his parents Ranginui and Papatūānuku apart. This final act created the world of life and light as we know it (*Te Ao Mārama*).<sup>19</sup>

Although Io officially delegated these tasks to the primal father Ranginui and his son Tāne, he continued to manage the creation process through his spirit messengers.<sup>20</sup>

It is a singular trait of modern Māori religion that the gods (*ngā Atua*) and God (*Te Atua*), who for some is Io, are placed side by side and not in conflict.<sup>21</sup> On the question of how this could be so, we should recall Marsden's point that only cultural insiders could understand the intricacies of a Māori worldview.<sup>22</sup> This holds true for the notion of Io.

Māori views on the identity and authenticity of Io are still in development. In some tribal traditions, cosmological *whakapapa* begins with Io, while in others it begins with *Te Kore*, the pre-creation void mentioned earlier. Those who follow the Io tradition believe that he wove together the very fabric of the universe. For the *tobunga* Te Mātorohanga and Nēpia Pōhūhū, whose testimony informed the first published account of Io in Whatahoro's *Lore of the Whare-wānanga*, he was not a derivative of the Christian God introduced by missionaries, as critics claim, but an authentically Māori one.<sup>23</sup>

For those Māori who subscribe to a belief in Io, he is the genuine starting point of Māori cosmology. He is its 'supreme god',<sup>24</sup> the 'original creator of potentiality',<sup>25</sup> the starting point of *whakapapa*.<sup>26</sup> Io is described as the 'great god of all',<sup>27</sup> the Creator of the universe, the 'Soul of Things'.<sup>28</sup> He is the source of all things in the Māori world,<sup>29</sup> even the creator of the traditional primal parents Papatūānuku and Ranginui.<sup>30</sup> Like the prime mover of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*,<sup>31</sup> he is the 'uncaused'<sup>32</sup> first cause of creation.<sup>33</sup>

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For believers, Io outranks all other *atua* as supreme *Atua*,<sup>34</sup> the Great Spirit,<sup>35</sup> a ‘unique figure’ among Māori gods.<sup>36</sup> He is simply the Supreme Being,<sup>37</sup> the ‘ultimate God’.<sup>38</sup> This makes Io, controversially for other Māori traditions, the creator of the minor gods. Thus, the Māori theologian Wayne Te Kaawa writes that Io is the ‘first or original cause of creation and is the source of Atua [the Māori gods]’.<sup>39</sup> Another scholar goes so far as to view these Māori gods as agents of Io’s will.<sup>40</sup> This, in turn, makes Io the creator of human beings.<sup>41</sup>

Followers of Io who are also Christians have connected him to Jesus, seeing him as the voice of Io manifested in the word.<sup>42</sup> To understand this point, we ought to recall the late historian Dame Judith Binney’s observation on the Māori reception of Christian beliefs. It was ‘rarely a case of Māori abandoning their long-held beliefs,’ she writes, but of the old being ‘meshed and intertwined with the new.’ Māori followers ‘indigenised’ Christianity.<sup>43</sup>

Scholars who have critiqued Io as a pale imitation of Jehovah may thus have it backwards. For believers, the Bible did not furnish materials for fashioning Io so much as confirmation of *Io*’s fashioning of the world. The Māori indigenisation of Christianity did not create but adjusted new myths to the old. It did this by identifying Io with the ‘Word made flesh’ of John 1:14, that is with Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while Io skeptics see him as a colonial hoax injected into Māori culture from without, his believers see him as anticipating the Christian gospel by millennia. In Io’s light, Jesus is Māorised.

Some Māori thinkers remain unconvinced.

For some, Io is a product of Māori culture. Taina Pohatu sees it as a concept for the primacy source from which *mauri*, the universal life force, emanates.<sup>45</sup> He suggests that the recitation of Io’s many names can invoke *mauri*, which ‘occurs where the names of Io are mentioned’.<sup>46</sup>

But others like Ritāne Wallace question the authority of the Io tradition.<sup>47</sup> Though skeptical, he sees the Io tradition as paradoxically both an assimilation of Christian monotheism and a syncretic means of resisting against the influence of Pākehā, white New-

Zealanders.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, Māori have a strong history of such practices.

In this vein, Rawiri Taonui sees Io as a creature of the Māori tendency to amalgamate Christian belief systems with indigenous traditions. Io, he writes, is

a more sophisticated construct complete with genealogies and narratives. Io was said to be the Supreme Being of Māori who created the heavens and earth, the first man and from him the first woman. Whiro, usually a navigator in Polynesian traditions, was transposed as the devil. There was a heaven and hell, and angels.<sup>49</sup>

Other writers not only reject Io as a corruption of Māori tradition by Christianity, but as a ‘distortion’ of Christianity itself.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, there is some evidence that the Io tradition existed in some tribal areas before colonial contact. In his research, the celebrated Māori historian and Catholic priest Pā Henare Tate traced the belief in Io to seven tribes and districts in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>51</sup> Relying on both Māori and Pākehā sources, Father Tate cautiously concluded on the note that the Io tradition was sufficiently well established and geographically dispersed ‘that we may dare to accept *Io* as an authentic Māori term to speak of the One whom Christians have also called *Atua*,’ that is God.<sup>52</sup>

The many views about Io are all valid aspects of Māori spirituality. This apparent logical contradiction is explained by the concept of *wairua*, a word for spirit which refers to the way in which Māori understand concepts in spiritual ways. Without this spirit, scholars looking in and using empirical research methods to investigate Māori culture may come to understand everything except what is essential to it. The mystery of Io cannot be grasped without *wairua*. While there is an abundance of evidence to show that Io was an invention as the critics claim,<sup>53</sup> these facts alone do nothing to explain the spiritual experiences of Māori believers in Io.

Whatever the outcome of the academic debate, Io is real to those who believe. Even as some Māori see him as a colonial protrusion in our culture, yet others, just as authentically Māori, recite *karakia* prayers to their Supreme God. This is disagreeable to those who



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critique Percy Smith and H.T. Whatahoro for allegedly re-engineering the Māori pantheon. But uncritically rejecting Io as a fake god risks repeating the mistake Smith and Whatahoro are accused of making, that of playing the part of arbiters of the sacred truths of a living culture.

Io is believed, what is believed is real, therefore Io is real—to his believers. Whether this syllogism is acceptable to Western philosophy is beside the point. What it does prove is that Māori tradition skilfully absorbed colonial Western culture, philosophy, and religion into its categories and did so on its own terms. Māori thinkers thus breathed new life into values, ideas, and maybe even gods that lay dying in Europe.

## Notes

- 1 See Percy Smith, 'Introduction', in H.T. Whatahoro, *The Lore of the Whare-wananga: Or, teachings of the Maori College on religion, cosmogony, and history, written down by H. T. Whatahoro from the teachings of Te Matorobanga and Nepia Pobuhu, priests of the Whare-wananga of the East coast, New Zealand*, Part I. 'Things Celestial', transl. S. Percy Smith (New Plymouth: N.Z., 1913), i.
- 2 James L. Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (Utrecht: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 57.
- 3 Peter Buck, *The Coming of the Maori* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1950), 526.
- 4 Nepia Mahuika, 'Kōrero Tuku Iho: Reconfiguring Oral History and Oral Tradition' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2010); Byron Rangiwai, 'Back to the Future: Using Prophecy to Support Māori Student Success in Tertiary Education', *Te Kabaroa: The eJournal on Indigenous Pacific Issues*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2021); Byron Rangiwai, 'Walking Backwards into the Future: Prophecy as an Approach for Embedding Indigenous Values in Tertiary Education', *Te Kabaroa: The eJournal on Indigenous Pacific Issues*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2021).
- 5 Roma Mere Roberts, 'Walking Backwards into the Future: Māori Views on Genetically Modified Organisms', *Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, WINHEC Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2005): 8.
- 6 Byron Rangiwai, 'A Kaupapa Māori Study of the Positive Impacts of Syncretism on the Development of Christian Faith among Māori from My Faith-World Perspective' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Otago, 2019).
- 7 Cox, *The Invention of God*, 65–66.
- 8 Byron Rangiwai, "'Stories are Knowledge, and Knowledge is Literature": Viewing and Re-Viewing Sites/Cites of Mātauranga Māori as an Alternative to Traditional Western Literature Reviews', *Te Kabaroa: The eJournal on Indigenous Pacific Issues*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018): 489–92.
- 9 Maori Marsden, 'God, Man and Universe: A Maori World View', in *Te Ao Huriruhū: The World Moves On. Aspects of Maoritanga*, ed. Michael King (Wellington: Hicks Smith and Sons, 1975), 218.
- 10 Marsden, 'God, Man and Universe', 219.
- 11 John C. Moorfield, *Te Aka—Māori—English, English—Māori Dictionary* (Auckland: Pearson, 2011).
- 12 David R. Simmons, *Iconography of New Zealand Maori Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986).
- 13 Michael P. J. Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao: The Beginning of the World', in *Te Kōparapara: An Introduction to the Māori World*, ed. Michael Reilly, Suzanne Duncan, Gianna Leoni, Lachy Paterson, Lyn Carter, Matui Rātima and Poia Rewi (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2018), 13.
- 14 Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao', 13.

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- 15 Maori Marsden, *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden* (Ōtaki: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden, 2003), 20.
- 16 Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao', 13.
- 17 Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths—Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington: Huia, 2011); Marsden, *The Woven Universe*; Michael P. J. Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Ngā Atua', in *Ki Te Whāiao: An Introduction to Māori Culture and Society*, ed. Tania M. Ka'ai, John. C. Moorfield, Michael P. J. Reilly and Sharon Mosley (Auckland: Pearson, 2004); Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao'.
- 18 Alexander W. Reed, *Reed Book of Māori Mythology* (Auckland: Reed, 2004); Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao'.
- 19 Marsden, *The Woven Universe*; Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao'.
- 20 Reed, *Reed Book of Māori Mythology*; Reilly, 'Te Tīmatanga Mai O Te Ao'.
- 21 Rangiwai, 'A Kaupapa Māori Study', 219.
- 22 Marsden, 'God, Man and Universe'.
- 23 Bronwyn Elsmore, *Mana from Heaven: A Century of Māori Prophets in New Zealand* (Auckland: Reed, 1999); Percy Smith, 'Percy Smith "Te Kauae-runga - Ngā kōrero a Te Mātorohanga rāua ko Nepia Pohuhu"', transl. Percy Smith, *Memoirs of the Polynesian Society*, Vol. 3 (New Plymouth: Printed by Thomas Avery, 1913).
- 24 T.P. Rollo, 'Mā Te Wai Ka Piki Ake Te Hauora', *New Zealand Journal of Music Therapy*, Vol. 11 (2013): 54.
- 25 Rebecca Wirihana, Cheryl Smith and Takirangi Smith, 'Māori Indigenous Healing Practices in Aotearoa (New Zealand)', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Race, Culture and Mental Health*, ed. Roy Moodley and Eunjung Lee (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 530.
- 26 Kuni Jenkins and Helen M. Harte, *Traditional Māori Parenting: An Historical Review of Literature of Traditional Māori Child Rearing Practices in Pre-European Times* (Auckland: Te Kahio Mana Ririki, 2011).
- 27 Te Haupapa-o-Tane, 'Io, The Supreme God, and Other Gods of the Māori', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1920): 141.
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- 29 Jonathan Te Rire, 'Taxonomy – Māori Whakapapa versus Western Science', *International Journal of Arts & Science*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2012): 59–73; Jordan Waiti and S. Awatere, 'Kaihekegaru: Māori Surfers and a Sense of Place', *Journal of Coastal Research*, Special Issue No. 87 (2019): 35–43.
- 30 Manuka Henare, 'Te Tangata, Te Taonga, Te Hau: Māori Concepts of Property', Paper presented to the Conference on Property and the Constitution, Wellington for the Laws and Institutions in a Bicultural Society Research Project, Waikato University, 18 July 1998; Ella Henry and Hone Pene, 'Kaupapa Māori: Locating Indigenous Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology in the Academy', *Organization*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2001): 234–42.
- 31 See Aristotle, 'Lambda 7', *The Metaphysics* (London: Penguin, 2004), 372.

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- 32 Whaanga, 'Maori Values can Reinvigorate a New Zealand Philosophy', 67.
- 33 Piripi Whaanga, 'Maori Values can Reinvigorate a New Zealand Philosophy' (unpublished master's thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2012).
- 34 Lisa Pohatu, 'Iron Maori: A Kaupapa Māori Driven Hauora Initiative' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Otago, 2015).
- 35 Donny R. Tuakiritetangata and Alicia Ibarra-Lemay, 'Tūhonotanga—A Māori Perspective of Healing and Well-being through Ongoing and Regained Connection of Self, Culture, Kin, Land and Sky', *Genealogy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2021): 1–12.
- 36 Wayne M. R. Te Kaawa, 'Re-Visioning Christology through a Māori Lens' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Otago, 2020), 40.
- 37 Hirini G. Reedy, 'Te Tohu-a-Tuu: A Study of the Warrior Arts of the Maori' (unpublished master's thesis, Massey University, 1996), 26.
- 38 Ruth Lemon, 'The Impact of New Media on Māori Culture and Belief Systems', *Working Papers in Culture, Discourse and Communication*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001): 4.
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- 40 Jonathan Te Rire, 'The Dissipation of Indigeneity through Religion' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Otago, 2009), 32.
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- 42 Marsden, *The Woven Universe*.
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- 44 Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012), 158.
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- 48 Wallace, 'Kotahi Anō Te Tupuna O Te Tangata Māori'.
- 49 Rawiri Taonui, 'Nga Tatai-Whakapapa: Dynamics in Māori Oral Tradition' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Auckland, 2005). 37.
- 50 See, for example, Eruena R. Prendergast-Tarena, 'He Atua, He Tipua, He Takata Rānei: The Dynamics of Changes in South Island Māori Oral Traditions' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Canterbury, 2008), 28.

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- 51 According to Pa Tate, the Io tradition is found in Ngāti Kahungunu, Waikato, Ngāi Tahu, Te Tairāwhiti, Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Whātua. See Henare A. Tate, 'Towards Some Foundations of a Systematic Māori Theology: He Tirohanga Anganui Ki Ūtahi Kaupapa Hōhonu Mō Te Whakapono Māori' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Divinity, 2010).
- 52 Tate, 'Towards Some Foundations', 279.
- 53 Cox, *The Invention of God*, 65–66.