

D. F. McKenzie's "Providential Version" and the Biblical Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

In his essay on the history of the Treaty of Waitangi, "The Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand", D. F. McKenzie invokes a markedly theological language, culminating in his claim that it is best to think about the Treaty of Waitangi using the concept of an ideal text — and in terms of what he intriguingly terms a "providential version" — rather than thinking about the Treaty of Waitangi as reducible to its various differing versions in circulation. McKenzie's secular version of providence and transcendence offers an important corrective to narrow forms of historicism and materialism operating in textual studies. This article argues that the history of the Bible's reception — informed by the tension between "the Bible" as a transcendent unity and as an indeterminate collection of individual texts — constitutes an important context for McKenzie's "providential version" metaphor. The article contends that the idea of transhistorical and transcendent totality encompassing textual diversity exemplified by the history of the Bible's reception plays a vital role in McKenzie's essay.

IN HIS FAMOUS ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF THE TREATY OF WAITANGI, "THE Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand", the bibliographer D. F. McKenzie discusses how through this Treaty the indigenous Maori were understood by the British to have ceded to them sovereignty over their lands. McKenzie shows how the British exploited their culturally-specific understanding of the social power of contractual written documents, an understanding the Maori did not share, in order to take control of the land.

Surprisingly, and in spite of the secular context and nature of his argument, in the conclusion to this essay McKenzie invokes a markedly theological language, culminating in his claim that it is best to think about the Treaty using the category of an ideal text — and in terms of what he intriguingly terms a "providential version" — rather than thinking about the Treaty as reducible to its various differing versions in circulation. McKenzie's essay is a creative and innovative intervention into the perennial crux at the heart of textual scholarship: that works are

understood to be singular entities even as it is acknowledged that the texts of works exist in multiple, varying forms.¹ Thus “the Treaty” designates a singular entity even though multiple versions of it are extant. As we shall see, McKenzie makes a strong appeal to a form of transcendence in order to properly account for the social and ethical meanings and values associated with the Treaty. “Transcendence” here designates the horizon of social meanings and values beyond immediate historical moments and individual, contingent texts. McKenzie’s conception of a providential version entails the materialist and historicist insights central to textual studies but also highlights what we shall see are encompassing frames of meaning and value that are in danger of being ignored by certain strains of textual scholarship.

McKenzie’s theological language, and especially his metaphor of the providential version, gestures inescapably towards the Bible, the ultimate “providential text”. The phrase “providential version” carries with it the idea of a transcendent order (“providence”) combined with textual multiplicity (“version”), a conjuncture whose dominant cultural exemplar is the Bible. That McKenzie’s metaphor alludes to the Bible remains the case despite the wholly secular nature of his argument, and the fact that the ideal text and “providential version” he proposes as the proper way of assessing the history of the Treaty is not divinely given but emerges from within history (as the word “version” in his paradoxical phrase “providential version” suggests). It is important to note that McKenzie’s term “providential version” refers not to the Treaty itself, but, as we shall see, to something more like the ongoing hermeneutical situation in which the Treaty is received diachronically by Maori and settlers having various views of its meaning.

This article will show how the providential version metaphor, along with the other theological language McKenzie invokes, can be seen to engage the Bible’s reception history. McKenzie’s providential version metaphor alludes to the Bible as a discursive site in which individual writings dispersed in time have been understood to be gathered up into a transcendent wholeness. McKenzie’s recourse to the idea of the Bible stems from the latter’s status as the pre-eminently conspicuous cultural symbol of transcendent unity embracing textual diversity. This conjuncture of transcendent unity and textual diversity is precisely what is at issue for McKenzie at the close of his essay on the Treaty of Waitangi.

What exactly does this biblical allusion do for McKenzie? In the pages that follow, I contend that the history of the Bible’s reception reveals

1. TANSSELLE 1989, 13; EGGERT 2019, 2

that ethical and even political problems arise when the Bible has been removed from a providential framework. In such cases, prior forms of unity and communion among divine and human agents throughout history are fragmented and atomized. The transhistorical and transcendent wholeness exemplified by the idea of providence means that it can function as a metaphor for a complete and unfragmented picture of social reality, and it is this capacity that draws McKenzie to it as the means of expressing his textual theory.

It may *prima facie* seem offensive that McKenzie draws positively upon the language of the Christian tradition in this essay, given that the evangelizing of the Maori was so closely tied to their colonization and attempted cultural assimilation. Yet the function and significance of McKenzie's theological language is not necessarily exhausted by the charge of Eurocentrism. To simply dismiss it is to fail to register the complex nature of McKenzie's argument and how he recuperates theological resources to oppose, rather than contribute to, oppression.

After exploring McKenzie's theological language within the context of his essay, I will consider the way this language resonates with the history of the Bible's reception, and in the conclusion, I will explore the function and meaning of McKenzie's recourse to theology within what is after all a wholly secular argument. I will also argue for the importance of McKenzie's approach to the paradox of textual singularity and diversity, contending that it reveals how a conception of transcendence is inescapable in order to adequately account for the meaning of texts within human experience construed across time, despite the fact that invocations of transcendence are frequently anathema in contemporary humanities scholarship.

"A Providential Version"

We turn now to consider in detail McKenzie's remarkable metaphor of a "providential version" and the theological language surrounding it. One reason this metaphor, and the argument of which it is a part, is so remarkable is that McKenzie often eschews a normative account of textual history which privileges certain versions over others. On the contrary, McKenzie often stresses the distinct historical reality of each version of a text (1999, 29). For example, in his forward to *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, McKenzie writes that "each version [of a work] has some claim to be edited in its own right, with a proper respect for its historicity as an artefact"

(1999, 2).² To some extent going against the grain of this sentiment, at the heart of McKenzie's essay on the Treaty of Waitangi is an argument about the ethical and political inadequacy of narrow forms of materialist and historicist focus which can endanger humanistic enquiry. McKenzie's essay thus reveals an enduring problem with how we think about the relationship between historical moments on the one hand and the higher-order forms of meaning which might encompass these moments on the other.

In "The Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand", originally delivered as an address to the Bibliographical Society in London in 1983, McKenzie provides a history of literacy and printing in his native New Zealand, which is at the same time a story of attempted cultural assimilation and colonial exploitation. He recounts how in the early decades of the nineteenth century, driven by Christian missionary purposes, the language of the indigenous Maori was rendered into Roman script by English settlers so as to facilitate Maori Bible-reading. McKenzie also discusses the early printing of Maori texts in New Zealand, including, most significantly, the Maori New Testament, produced in such vast quantities that by 1845 one copy was available for every two Maori people (1999, 105).

After laying out this history of literacy and printing in the early colonial era, McKenzie proceeds to discuss the production and legal afterlife of the Treaty of Waitangi, "signed" (the quotation marks are McKenzie's) in 1840 by forty-six Maori chiefs (1999, 79). The Treaty was used by the British as the basis of a legal claim of sovereignty over New Zealand, yet the Treaty's significance and authority have been contested and debated throughout the nation's history. McKenzie demonstrates the significance of bibliography conceived as a "sociology of texts" for getting a handle on this history. As he shows, there were multiple versions of the Treaty in both the English and Maori languages, having substantial differences in content, in circulation at the time of the Treaty's signing. Moreover, there are multiple forms of evidence — much in the form of recorded oral statements — that the Maori chiefs had various interpretations and understandings of the treaty they signed, most of which do not conform to the "official" British interpretation which coincides with colonial law. Most significantly, many of the chiefs appear not to have intended to cede their sovereign power (*mana*) over the land, and subsequently many Maori people have understood the spirit of the Treaty in this way (McKENZIE 1999, 121–24).

2. McKenzie did acknowledge here that in some cases it is legitimate for editors to essentially create a "new version" through conflation or adaptation.

The passing of this treaty, McKenzie contends, was predicated on the gulf separating the Maori and British understandings of the document and its signing. As McKenzie puts it, analyzing the Treaty's history provides "a prime example of European assumptions about the comprehension, status, and binding power of written statements and written consent on the one hand as against the flexible accommodations of oral consensus on the other" (1999, 79). For the primarily oral Maori, "the truth is not so confined" to any one document as it was for the English; "the 'text' was the consensus arrived at through discussion, something much more comprehensive and open than the base document or any one of its extant versions" (McKENZIE 1999, 125).³

McKenzie argues that viewing the different versions of the Treaty as atomized, self-contained entities is wholly inadequate to an ethical assessment of its history. In making this observation, McKenzie pushes against received wisdom concerning the relationship between traditionally received ideas on the one hand and historical documentation on the other. This latter understanding is insightfully articulated by J.G.A. Pocock in an essay on the nature of traditions within society. Pocock points out that traditions can be challenged once the textual record constituting the tradition is made available to scrutiny, noting that

[d]ocuments tend to secularise traditions; they reduce them to a sequence of acts [. . .] taking place at distinguishable moments, in distinguishable circumstances exercising and imposing distinguishable kinds and degrees of authority. They reduce time from a simple conceptualisation of social continuity to that of an indefinite multiplicity of continuities, which — since in the last analysis they represent different ideas of action, authority and transmission — cannot be altogether consistent with one another.

(1971, 255–56)

3. Along these lines, for the Maori the Treaty of Waitangi did not supersede the earlier Declaration of Independence of 1835 which affirmed the sovereignty of the Maori chiefs. McKenzie notes that as late as 1839 new chiefs' signatures were being added, suggesting that the Declaration was conceived by the Maori as "a living affirmation of Maori sovereignty" (1999, 120). This affirmation was not negated by the Treaty of Waitangi: "[the documents] lived together, one complementing the other" (McKENZIE 1999, 120). In other words, one document participates in the other, rather than representing a discrete entity which displaces its predecessor.

Pocock reveals the liberatory power of demystifying traditions by attending to the variegated, conflicting histories, often embodied in individual textual records, out of which they derive. Bibliography and textual studies are essential to such demystification. Such an argument corresponds closely with modern assumptions about the relationships among enlightenment, democracy, literacy, and the need for public accessibility of historical records. Social advancement, the idea goes, depends on exposing received traditions through close examination of how these traditions are forged, and this requires a close examination of the variegated archive of textual records.

Yet McKenzie shows that the case of the Treaty Waitangi is not adequately comprehended by such a view. “But must the story end there, in a conflict of irreconcilable versions?” (1999, 126), he asks rhetorically. McKenzie proceeds to consider the typical argument leveled against “ideal texts”, which are editorial confluents of actual, existing versions. He acknowledges that “In the rarefied world of textual scholarship, it would be commendably scholarly to deny any possibility of conflation, any notion that ‘the text’ of the Treaty of Waitangi is anything other than its distinct historical versions” (McKENZIE 1999, 126). Yet McKenzie goes on to castigate inflexible adherence to the individual, material text, observing that ideal texts are “vitally operative in legal opinion on the interpretation of treaties as documents which must be interpreted in the spirit in which they are drawn” (1999, 126).

The scholarly emphasis on each version of a text needing to be viewed as a distinct artifact embodying particular intentions deriving from the concrete situation of its emergence is in itself incomplete.⁴ Such a perspective is by no means incommensurable with the idea that texts are caught up in broad social contexts, or that different versions have historical relationships with each other. However, as McKenzie argues, the history of the Treaty of Waitangi and its consequences are not well served by an exclusive emphasis on historical particularity and on a view of history as reducible to a series of discrete, sequential moments. Indeed, under the Treaty of Waitangi Act a tribunal was set up to assess the Treaty and its history, out of which was discovered “the *social inutility* of a clutter of versions, as distinct from the *social value* of a harmonized text” (McKENZIE 1999, 127).⁵

4. For a comparable argument, see Paul Eggert’s critique of the social texts model from the perspective of editing (2019, 4).

5. McKenzie is here commenting on a 1983 report of the Waitangi Tribunal.

At this point, wrapping up his argument, McKenzie's essay changes register and adopts a distinctly theological vocabulary and prophetic tone. Not only are the Maori described as perceiving a distinction between spirit and letter in their assessment of the Treaty and its significance, and not only does McKenzie refer to one understanding of the Maori language version of the Treaty — which retains the Maori's traditional sovereignty and which has been disparaged by colonial law — as a "sacred covenant [. . .] which places it above the law" (1999, 127–28); but, invoking a notion of transcendence, McKenzie also insists that Maori culture "will generate, not a fixed text, but a variety of versions which have their local and topical value in giving life to the *wairua* [spirit] of the 'text' which comprehends and transcends them all" (1999, 127, n88). The idea of transcendence is repeated shortly after this, at a point where McKenzie invokes the most intriguing theological language of all. In concluding his argument, he makes imaginative use of a metaphor of "providential" transcendence:

As the Maori always knew, there is a real world beyond the niceties of the literal text and in that world there is in fact a providential version now editing itself into the status of a social and political document of power and purpose. The physical versions and their fortuitous forms are not the only testimonies of intent: implicit in the accidents of history is an ideal text which history has begun to discover, a reconciliation of readings which is also a meeting of minds. The concept of an ideal text as a cultural and political imperative is not imposed on history but derives from an understanding of the social dynamics of textual criticism.

(1999, 128)

What he refers to as a "providential version" is the full human situation in which multiple versions of the Treaty, multiple intentions, and multiple interpretations interact, within the context of power relations and with a just world as its horizon. To single-mindedly home in on this or that individual version can lead to blindness to this totality. Here, of course, "providence" refers not literally to the divine ordering of history: "providence" is used metaphorically to refer to diachronic human realities and structures of meaning which emerge from within history and are irreducible to a strictly localized level of individual moments, utterances, and textual versions. The paradoxical phrase "providential version" suggests a meaningful order ("providential") more expansive than the merely local, but which is nonetheless derived from within particular, immanent reality (indicated by

“version”). The transcendent order McKenzie imagines is the integrating framework for the multiplicity of historical phenomena.⁶

The Biblical Paradigm

McKenzie’s conspicuous use of theological language in his essay goes against the grain of much of the discourse of textual scholarship. It notably contrasts with Jerome McGann’s presentation of his postmodern textual theory, in which each individual version of a text, in its material particularity, needs to be addressed as an historical entity in its own right and opened up to its social, historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. McGann distances his approach from the sensibility of copy-text editing, a practice which posits one particular version as the “absolute centre” and proceeds to derive a conflated, “ideal” text with the copy-text as its basis. Quoting the New Testament’s Book of Acts, McGann describes the copy-text as the centre around which other texts “move and have their being” (1991, 74). In McGann’s formulation, the copy-text stands in the place of God. By implication, to divest the copy-text of its specious centrality is a bracing act of disenchantment.⁷ In striking contrast to this, McKenzie argues that at times viewing various texts as “having their being” (i.e., participating) in a higher-level unity may be wholly appropriate.

I wish now to consider how the history of the Bible can be seen to stand in the background of McKenzie’s argument. In order to fully appreciate the meanings raised by McKenzie’s metaphor of the “providential version” and the larger argument it symbolizes, I will contextualize his argument in terms of the historical reception of the Bible, which exemplifies the most sustained and culturally significant reflection on the crux of textual diversity and unity construed as transcendent. More specifically, I will argue that the Bible’s historical reception reveals that when the Bible has been sundered from a providential framework, this has resulted in forms of fragmentation resulting in ethical and political problems. This history of

6. McKenzie’s point here resembles Eggert’s recent argument that the concept of the singular work is best viewed not ontologically as an objectively-existing Platonic ideal, but rather phenomenologically as a communally shared “regulative idea” that comes out of history and experience (2019, 33).

7. We can find an analogy here with McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology*. Colin Jager argues that McGann presents his historicist critique of romantic idealism as a secularizing procedure expunging the “vestiges of religion and spirit” governing the romantic movement and its scholarly reception (2006, 35–36).

biblical reception illuminates how the idea of providence serves McKenzie as a metaphor of an unfragmented vision of social reality which he pits against an approach to the Treaty which atomizes this reality.

From the perspective of the Christian tradition, the term "the Bible" refers less to a discrete object than to something more like God's act of communication, grounded in God's transcendent eternity and providentially ordered throughout human history in the form of sacred writings. After all, the term "the Bible" carries in its ambit multiple versions, some of which contain significant differences. This being said, there have been moments in history when tension has arisen between the view of the Bible construed as a singular, divinely-given and providentially-ordered entity and "the Bible" construed as an indeterminately-bounded collection of individual historically and culturally dispersed texts devoid of divinely-given relationships whereby they would constitute a larger whole. At these moments, some of which will be sketched below, not only have doctrinal and theological disputes been waged, but also ethical and political issues have been raised which, while not separable from their theological bases, nonetheless can resonate beyond a strictly "religious" context.

As we have seen, the history of the Treaty of Waitangi and its reception, in McKenzie's view, cannot be adequately assessed and understood without some unifying conception of "the Treaty". This is the case regardless of the fact of multiple versions of the Treaty. A similar point is made about the Bible by the literary critic Northrop Frye, who famously explored the Bible, not as the vehicle of divine revelation, but rather as a literary document providing the deep structures of much Western cultural production. Frye reveals that the idea of biblical singularity is not confined to a theological perspective but has purchase in a secular, literary context as well. In the introduction to *The Great Code*, he muses rhetorically that "[p]erhaps [. . .] there is no such entity as 'the Bible,' and what is called 'the Bible' may be only a confused and inconsistent jumble of badly established texts" (1990, xii). Yet Frye raises this historicist spectre of the Bible's multiple, disconnected origins only to immediately exorcise it. "[A]ll of this, even if true," he declares, "does not matter." He goes on to affirm that in a fundamental and essential sense the Bible is a meaningful totality, a unified structure expressing the narratives, symbols, and themes which function at the heart of Western culture. "What matters", he contends, "is that 'the Bible' has traditionally been read as a unity, and has influenced Western imagination as a unity" (1990, xiii). Frye witheringly contrasts the positive project of cultural criticism he advocates with the work of historical criticism, in the "sub-basement" of which "disintegrating the text becomes an end in itself" (1990, xvii).

McKenzie's argument about the Treaty of Waitangi has certain echoes not just with this literary approach to the question of biblical singularity, but even more profoundly with theological approaches. To be sure, an important difference lies in the fact that the Bible's singularity is, within Christian perspective, grounded in its divine source; McKenzie's ideal text obviously lacks such suprahistorical grounding. Yet important points of connection remain. This is evident when we consider Matthew Levering's book *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, which opens in a way strikingly analogous to McKenzie's argument. Levering begins his book with the proposal that Christian engagement with Scripture "should envision history not only as a linear unfolding of individual moments, but also as an ongoing participation in God's active providence" (2008, 1). Levering seeks, "[i]n agreement with historical-critical exegesis", to study the Bible "in its original ancient contexts", even as he simultaneously affirms that "these original contexts never stand on their own." This is because the moments in this horizontal succession are all suffused by God's presence and thereby always linked to the vertical axis of eternity. Here, "participation in God joins past, present, and future realities in a unified whole, so that through God's presence each moment is related intrinsically, not merely extrinsically, to every other moment" (LEVERING 2008, 1).

Levering's theological argument that the various historical contexts of the different biblical texts never stand on their own bears an analogy with McKenzie's argument. Indeed, McKenzie can be seen to develop a secular conception of such a participatory account of texts, in which the individual historical versions of the Treaty participate in the entire history of the text, as well as in the history of its production and reception, and in the social relations constituting these. While the secular nature of McKenzie's argument clearly distinguishes it from the theological approach to the Bible's textual history promoted by Levering, both scholars seek to view textual history in a non-atomized way, as participating in a higher order beyond the individual text.⁸

8. In his lecture "The Broken Phial: Non-Book Texts", McKenzie raises a similar idea, arguing for the necessity of retaining a sense of the underlying unity of a text beyond the plurality of forms in which it is mediated (1999, 52). He ends this lecture by quoting John Milton's (theological) statement in *Areopagitica* about the unity of truth, this being "the firm root out of which we all grow, though into branches" (McKENZIE 1999, 53).

Within the providential framework of Scripture advocated by Levering, three elements are connected: God as Scripture's origin, the authors of Scripture as the mediators of revelation, and the readers of Scripture throughout history. The removal of this providential frame for Scripture fragments this communion, resulting in isolated, atomized individual people, moments in time, and texts. Rather than "the Bible" exemplifying a divinely-given integration of sacred writings, their authors and readers, and their divine source, at certain moments people have championed a view of biblical texts as properly seen as discrete entities. This aspect of the Bible's reception history represents an important paradigm for thinking about McKenzie's providential version and its significance.

Just as McKenzie critiques aspects of textual studies in which the individual text is unduly privileged over any conception of a larger, encompassing whole, Levering levels a similar critique against modern biblical scholarship. Levering argues that modern biblical studies has tended to focus on the horizontal at the expense of the vertical, on the narrowly historical (in the sense of "homogeneous empty time" identified by Walter Benjamin) at the expense of the theological.⁹ Indeed, he understands this disciplinary focus on history as a purely "linear unfolding" as exemplary of the modernity of biblical studies, eschewing as it does the participatory vision characteristic of the patristic and medieval eras (LEVERING 2008, 3).¹⁰

This modern, non-participatory approach to Scripture achieves something of a high-water mark in the work of David C. Parker, a contemporary scholar of the New Testament manuscript tradition.

9. Summing up the character of much modern textual scholarship of the Bible, Kevin Vanhoozer observes that "Since the eighteenth century, biblical critics have by and large bracketed out the concerns of faith. Critics typically tend to treat the biblical text as evidence for something other than what God was doing in Israel and Jesus Christ — evidence used to reconstruct the original situation and 'what actually happened' or the history of the text's composition" (2003, 151). For this history, see also FREI 1974 and LEGASPI 2010.

10. As R. W. L. Moberly writes, "It is common knowledge that modern biblical criticism only became a recognizable discipline through the process of explicit severing of the Bible from classic theological formulations. The basis for this was the belief that only so could the Bible be respected and heard in its own right, untrammelled by preconceptions which supposed that the answers were already known even before the questions were asked, or by anachronistic impositions of the conceptualities and assumptions of subsequent ages" (2000, 5).

Echoing the textual theory of Jerome McGann, Parker forcefully contends that we can only derive authentic theology out of a treatment of the Bible which centers upon the individual texts apprehended in their material and historical specificity and eschews all claims to the Bible exemplifying a transcendent unity. For Parker, in other words, there is no “New Testament” understood as a real unity, only a manuscript of Luke’s Gospel over here and another manuscript of Paul’s letter to the Galatians over there. In his essay “Textual Criticism and Theology” he denies that the textual record of Scripture in any way allows access to the original revelation conventionally understood to stand behind them. “All that we have”, he writes, “are the witnesses to the text” (PARKER 2009, 333). Behind the texts that have come down to us is not the event of revelation — or not, at least, in a way that we can access — but other texts. Affirmation of this condition, he claims, is the basis for any theology. It is in the actual textual artifacts which have survived the vagaries of history, “in their physical reality, that we will find what there is to find.” He sums up his essay, along with twenty years of research, by announcing that “all my study of the New Testament text has to begin with the manuscripts, and having begun with them, cannot progress beyond them” (PARKER 2009, 333).

Parker’s position is antithetical to that of Levering, who argues that the individual biblical texts must be viewed simultaneously in their full integrity as concrete events and artifacts and as intrinsically constituted by their relationship to the totality of the Bible as divinely given. While from Levering’s theological perspective, Parker’s view leaves out the unifying activity of divine providence, from the perspective of McKenzie’s secular argument, its shortcoming is that it fails to account for the full human reality of textual history, which includes the historical forms of reception which mediate this reality.

One of the implications of Parker’s emphasis on the unsurpassable end point of the individual text’s concrete historical appearance is that the various biblical texts must be approached as a series of autonomous entities in isolation, lacking as they do any providentially-ordered unity. In this respect, Parker echoes the radical biblical arguments of Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, and a consideration alongside Hobbes helps reveal some of the ethical and political implications of Parker’s “de-providentializing” of Scripture.

In order to advance a political model in which the political sovereign had absolute control over all public forms of religion, in *Leviathan* Hobbes argued that what counts as sacred Scripture could only be so designated on the basis of the sovereign’s decision. This is because, he claims, while

individual books of the Bible may well have been divinely inspired, anyone beyond the direct, individual recipient of this revelation cannot know this to be the case.¹¹

At the heart of Hobbes's argument, grounded in his totalizing materialist metaphysics, is a rejection of the received understanding that the Holy Spirit who authors Scripture also guides the Church or the individual reader into recognition of the divinity of Scripture, thereby integrating Scripture, its ultimate divine and secondarily human authors, and the various readers throughout history. Hobbes's fragmented, non-providential Scripture provides the basis for a fragmented, atomized conception of human beings, a conception essential to his absolutizing political argument. This atomization means that people can only be brought together into political order through the extrinsic decision and power of the sovereign.¹² The example of Hobbes reveals how the removal of the providential frame for Scripture has considerable ethical and political implications, fragmenting individuals, institutions, and texts. In contrast, McKenzie's affirmation of providence, however metaphorical and secular, nonetheless seeks to affirm forms of continuity and of connection in order to achieve an adequate ethical and political framework for comprehending the Treaty of Waitangi's reception in history, and to open up space for a holistic Maori interpretation in which the full situation — including the demand for justice — is included.

McKenzie's metaphor of the "providential version" can be seen to be a secular replaying and reworking of ideas at the heart of the theological debates over the nature and origins of the Bible, and his metaphor reveals the wide conceptual and cultural resonance intrinsic to these biblical concerns. In McKenzie's analysis of the afterlife of the Treaty of Waitangi, we see revealed the need for a higher order of meaning above the welter

11. "How God speaketh to a man immediately", Hobbes writes, "may be understood by those well enough, to whom he hath spoken; but how the same should be understood by another, is hard, if not impossible to know. For if a man pretend to me, that God hath spoken to him supernaturally, and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce, to oblige me to beleieve it" (2014, 32.196). Given the fundamental opacity of revelation beyond the level of the individual, for the majority of humanity, all that is believed about God comes from other people: "when we Believe that the Scriptures are the word of God, having no immediate revelation from God himselfe, our Beleefe, Faith, and Trust is in the Church." For Hobbes, faith is always "Faith in men onely" (2014, 7.32).

12. This argument is developed in DeCook 2021, ch. 3.

of immanently-conceived moments, utterances, and textual versions. The transcendent order McKenzie imagines is the horizon beyond, and the proper frame for, the multiplicity of historical phenomena. This order is also the basis of a critique of a colonizing power which would try to dispense with the full “providential” situation; in his argument, the British have sought to negate Maori sovereignty by weaponizing a deracinating conception of the Treaty which represses the full panorama of social meanings. McKenzie shows that grappling with questions of meaning and order in history is inescapable if we wish to imagine just social forms and collective ways of being in the world, as they provide a means of moving beyond the atomizing reductions and the destructive consequences of modernity’s social imaginary.

Conclusion

Despite the secularity of his project, McKenzie’s specifically Judeo-Christian conceptual register, and the prophetic edge to his hortatory rhetoric, can be seen to exemplify a reliance on a specific religious tradition. Intrinsic to McKenzie’s argument is a fullness of signification and loftiness of tone achieved through recourse to theological tradition; he leverages the cultural heft of this tradition in order to express the importance of an adequate, ethical understanding of how texts operate within human history. His argument finds recourse in the forms and language of theology to articulate a vision which would bring together both difference and a higher order. This is of course not to say that McKenzie offers a “religious” interpretation of the colonial situation upon which he focuses. Nonetheless, to provide an ethical grasp on the colonial situation of his native New Zealand, McKenzie must go beyond a narrow view of texts in history in order to affirm a vision of transcendence, of a higher order holding these diverse phenomena together. Only with such a vision, he contends, can questions of meaning and value be properly approached.

In response to the question of why McKenzie invokes the concept of providence, we can now answer that it offers him a culturally powerful way of signifying the totality. If, within theological tradition, all that is comes from and is ultimately ordered by God, providence offers an image of the kind of contextual wholeness to which humanistic study must ceaselessly aspire. The argument in favour of a providential version, made many decades ago by one of the most influential advocates for giving the individual, material text its due, has much to say to contemporary humanities. While

interest in the material forms of culture and culture's historical specificity have been undeniably salutary, McKenzie cautions against the dangers of a deracinating view of the material text which downplays the meanings and values in which texts are situated and which they communicate. He argues powerfully for the importance of ever-more-inclusive and encompassing frames of meaning and value, a vision in which he finds a surprising but illuminating symbol in the transcendent and providential Bible.

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