

This article investigates the unsettled relationship between religion and politics in Aotearoa New Zealand through a close study of the 2020 General Election. By examining three intersecting policy domains—health reform, Māori policy, and foreign affairs—the article examines the ways in which the New Conservatives, One Party, Vision New Zealand, and Advance New Zealand challenged normative paradigms of the ‘religious right’. While these groups’ moral conservatism loomed large in the public eye, their pursuit of radical possibilities for social change remains little understood. While these parties were often antagonistic and always provocative, a close analysis of their policies helps to situate how conservative, far-right, and progressive politics may be found knitted together in the political fabric of Aotearoa New Zealand. Recognising this reality is important for the left to counter extremism, foster progressive alliances, and productively imagine alternative futures.

The 'Religious Right' in the 2020 Aotearoa New Zealand General Election

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Stephanie Harawira, Hannah Tamaki, Billy Te Kahika, Elliot Ikilei—2020's General Election heralded a proliferation of new voices in Aotearoa New Zealand's Christian politics.¹ Through an examination of One Party, New Conservative, Advance New Zealand, and Vision New Zealand, this study interrogates the emergence of what we might consider the 'religious right'. While these parties may not have experienced electoral success, their significance is not measured in levels of parliamentary representation. Instead, as radical voices, it is their provocation to conventional policy discourse that is worthy of attention. These parties highlight the limitations of normative political frameworks, such as political compasses, secularism, and biculturalism. While they are often caustic, by examining these voices, we can come to a fuller understanding of contemporary politics in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The four parties in this study experienced no electoral success in 2020 or beyond, and they seem unlikely to coalesce into a movement of parliamentary substance. And yet, they

1 I would like to thank Philip Fountain for his support in the research and preparation of the early versions of this article. I owe a great deal to his advice and encouragement to pursue publication. My thanks must also go to the academic and editorial reviewers at *Counterfutures*, whose comments were invaluable in further developing the paper.

might help us to tease out some significant threads of our contemporary political fabric. Whether or not these groups meaningfully account for the conditions and beliefs that shape their policies, they have been unable to engage in constructive dialogues outside of their immediate spheres of influence.

But the anxieties I locate around the minor parties of the 2020 General Election seem to have taken on a broader role in the intervening years. While the thorny complexities of discussing political motivations are sharper for religious parties, their experiences speak to the wider conditions of ideological dialogue in Aotearoa New Zealand. Having returned to this article at moments before, during, and after the 2023 General Election, I wonder if the hazy shapes that outline the visions and motivations of today's mainstream political actors might continue to indicate a wider unease around ideological commitment. Running across this political fabric is a tension between full accounts of how we theorise our objectives and a cautionary approach to the optics of affiliation. This study might be limited to the 2020 General Election, but this moment remains an important one in our political history, worthy of further analysis. The influence of international right-wing movements, new developments in anti-colonial politics, and unclear proto-populist, conspiratorial ideologies are some of the phenomena that were nascent in the 2020 General Election and which continue to shape our political context today. The findings of this study still tell us something meaningful about the political present and future in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This study focuses on local policy analysis and the historical factors that shaped the Christian politics of the 2020 General Election. But, importantly, Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune to the international influence of the radical right more generally. While this paper will demonstrate the shortcomings of pinning familiar, right-wing conservative labels on these multi-faceted religio-political movements in Aotearoa New Zealand, they remain connected to the directions taken by groups abroad. Globally, we might understand the resurging far right as a response to the failures of

the neoliberal world order.² Alongside economic displacement and the deterioration of material conditions, the far right emerges as an alternative to stale centrist thought, reacting to the social, economic, and political consequences of neoliberal orthodoxy, such as globalisation, immigration, and multiculturalism.³ We can't reduce the resurgence of the far right to xenophobia and economic hardship alone, because central to its imagination are a contempt for establishment governance and a sense of marginalisation from the profiteering classes of the political elite.⁴

While both socioeconomic failures and responses from the far right intensified from 2007—amidst and in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis and European Debt Crisis—they stretch back into a much longer history of ferment.⁵ During what Cas Mudde labels the 'third wave' of the far right, 1980–2000, the far right's political parties remained relative 'newcomers and outsiders', and their ideas were 'marginalized in the public debate'.⁶ However, pointing to shifts in political speech, the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, and the wider adoption of extremist aesthetics, Cynthia Miller-Idriss demonstrates that the ideas of the far right are in an ongoing

2 Melinda Cooper, 'Anti-Austerity on the Far Right', *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, eds. William Callison and Zachary Manfredi (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), 138. Owen Worth, 'Reasserting Hegemonic Masculinity: Women's Leadership within the Far Right', *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021), 503.

3 Pasko Kisić Merino, Tereza Capelos and Catarina Kinnvall, 'Getting Inside "The Head" of the Far Right: Psychological Responses to the Socio-Political Context', *Re-searching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice*, eds. Stephen D. Ashe, Joel Busher, Graham Macklin, and Aaron Winter (Milton, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 75.

4 Mark Davis, 'Transnationalising the Anti-Public Sphere: Australian Anti-Publics and Reactionary Online Media', *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia*, eds. Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 130.

5 Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 52; 253–254.

6 Cas Mudde, 'The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (2022), 103.

process of normalisation.⁷ There is thus no clear line to be drawn between the fringe and the mainstream. These ideas take hold in response to ‘very real dislocations and vulnerabilities’, writes Max Soar, arguing that a meaningful commitment to ‘anti-fascist politics’ in Aotearoa New Zealand will identify, interrogate, and anticipate the directions of the radical right.⁸ Such tasks are crucial to the left’s expression of a cogent alternative.

Although I will use the terms ‘religious right’ and ‘Christian right’ throughout this study—an attempt to coherently locate these political parties within local and international discourses—it is important to note that these parties have a fraught relationship with such terms. Miller-Idriss conceptualises the far right as a spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and strategies.⁹ No single group need necessarily present all the markers of far-right thought—anti-government/anti-democracy, exclusion, existential threats and conspiracies, and apocalyptic fantasies—in order to be part of this spectrum.¹⁰ Indeed, some may attempt to disrupt the usual logics of the far right with activism against one or more of these themes.¹¹ Andrea Smith, for example, demonstrates that sites of progressive resistance exist in places that may seem unlikely, through an examination of anti-carceral and Native American feminist activism within conservative evangelical movements.¹² This study will attempt to highlight the transgressive beliefs and practices of local movements usually understood as comprehensive Christian conservatives. Understanding the complexities of the religious right, I suggest, presents opportunities for progressive alliance-building.

Aotearoa New Zealand’s religious political parties stand firmly in the legacy of Christian welfare, activism, and a constellation of powerful entanglements

7 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 46–47.

8 Max Soar, ‘What is the Far-Right in Aotearoa New Zealand?’, *Counterfutures* 14 (2023), 180.

9 Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 18.

10 Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 4.

11 Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 18.

12 Andrea Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

with indigeneity, despite virile strands of social and fiscal conservatism running through their policies. The historical, social, and spiritual features of the contemporary political landscape have combined to produce a local ‘religious right’ whose imperatives present a departure from international counterparts. These parties’ conceptions of the interface between spirituality and identity mark a provocative challenge to mainline institutions of political meaning, expressed through, for example, Māori policy, foreign policy with respect to the Aotearoa New Zealand-Israel relationship, and referenda policy. They contest definitions of ‘left’ and ‘right’ as much as normative understandings of privatised religion and secular governance. They illuminate the awkwardness of religious engagements by the major political parties and make damningly clear the failures of the media to engage effectively with spiritual voices. Chasing economic and constitutional reform, these parties offer radical imaginations for enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi and tino rangatiratanga. Thus, while these parties might have affinities with aspects of the international far right, they also demonstrate the fragility of the ways in which we conceptualise the relationship between religion and politics, which is worth taking seriously.

The Historical Landscape of Religion in Aotearoa New Zealand Politics

While never officially having an established religion, Aotearoa New Zealand supported a ‘generic Christianity’ from the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century.¹³ The major political parties acknowledged ‘the largely Christian character of post-war Aotearoa New Zealand’, and religious organisations seldom intervened in politics.¹⁴ With a public ethic that stands apart from religious worldviews, Douglas Pratt argues that New Zealanders may even be ‘studiously ignorant of religion’ in their conception of faith

13 Rex Adhar, ‘Reflections on the Path of Religion-State Relations in New Zealand’, *BYU Law Review* 3 (2006), 619.

14 Raymond Miller, ‘Future of the Religious Right in New Zealand Politics’, *Stimulus* 13, no. 4 (2005), 50.

as open to neither discussion nor politicisation.¹⁵ However, imagining a hard-line separation between religion and politics overlooks a history of interaction and collaboration, especially for Māori and Pasifika. Indeed, from some Māori perspectives, the two may be considered ‘inseparable’.¹⁶ Much of the literature in political science, history, and religious studies belies the rich narrative of Māori activism at the nexus of religion and politics.¹⁷

Over the last fifty years, I identify three factors that have shaped the relationship between Aotearoa New Zealand politics and religion in ways that fertilised the growth of a new ‘Christian right’ in 2020: the waning religious capital of the major parties (through reforms both economic and moral); the crumbled Rātana alliance’s loss of Māori spiritual and political alignment with Labour; and the introduction of the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system in 1993. These factors orientate an understanding of how contemporary Christian movements might reimagine well-trodden paths of possibility.

If we take the first of these factors, the waning religious capital of the major parties, we can note that the devastating aftermath of Aotearoa New Zealand’s 1980s and 1990s neoliberal market reforms marked a clash between religion and institutional politics.¹⁸ With a commitment to ‘individualism’ and a ‘preference for private enterprise’, from 1984, the Labour government slashed taxes, deregulated the markets, and streamlined the public sector.¹⁹

15 One News, ‘Coalition New Zealand Party has No Policies, Calling for Members’, *One News Breakfast*, 24 May, 2020; Douglas Pratt, ‘Religious Diversity: From Cultural Evolution to Societal Affirmation’, *Social Inclusion* 4, no. 2 (2016), 53.

16 Keith Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet* (Auckland: Penguin New Zealand, 2009), 14.

17 Jonathan Malloy, ‘Political Opportunity Structures, Evangelical Christians and Morality Politics in Canada, Australia and New Zealand’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 3 (2017), 406.

18 Mike Mawson, ‘Believing in Protest: The Liberal Ideal of the Separation of Religion and Politics in Two Recent Religious Protests’, *New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 21, no. 2 (2006), 202.

19 Jonathan Boston, ‘Thatcherism and Rogernomics: Changing the Rules of the Game—Comparisons and Contrasts’, *Political Science* 39, no. 2 (1987): 131–132; Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment?* (Auckland University Press, 1995).

Subsequently, the National government of 1990 ‘dismantle[d] significant elements of the post-war welfare state’²⁰ With ensuing surges in poverty and inequality, faith-based charitable organisations became one of the primary safety nets for society’s most vulnerable.²¹ Māori and Pasifika were, disproportionately, among the hardest hit by the disastrous social consequences of these reforms.²² Epitomised by the 1998 Hīkoi of Hope—a protest of tens of thousands that marched the length of the country, with significant Anglican backing across Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā congregations—Christian groups emerged in vocal opposition to the direction of government policy.²³ Whether as individual organisations or ecumenical bodies, Christian communities produced vehement critiques of the governmental agenda, calling for the state to serve as ‘a crucial and indispensable instrument in the quest for a just society.’²⁴ However, as Jonathan Boston suggests, religious perspectives on policy face a crisis of legitimacy; while in-depth proposals are considered incompetently developed, a failure to be specific can lead to faith perspectives being seen as ‘fudging the hard questions.’²⁵ This anxiety-ridden paradox continues to diminish the political capital of religious voices in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The neoliberal economic transformation has a clear starting-point in the mid-1980s, but the moral clashes between Christian communities and their governments have a fuzzier timeline, reaching back into the 1960s and 1970s. While conservative groups stewed away in reaction to 1960s permissiveness, Dolores Janiewski concludes that the 1970s represents the start of conservative

20 David Conradson, ‘Expressions of Charity and Action Towards Justice: Faith-based Welfare Provision in Urban New Zealand’, *Urban Studies* 45, no. 10 (2008), 2122.

21 Conradson, ‘Expressions of Charity’, 2122.

22 Michael Beggs, ‘The Hīkoi of Hope’, *Salient*, 28 September, 1998, 14.

23 Conradson, ‘Expressions of Charity’, 2127.

24 Boston, ‘Christianity in the Public Square’, 19.

25 Boston, ‘Christianity in the Public Square’, 21.

Christian political organising.²⁶ This organising continued from early debates over abortion into those around the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the 1980s.²⁷ However, as the pace of moral reform accelerated—especially under the leadership of Helen Clark from 1999–2008, which saw the introduction of same-sex civil unions, decriminalisation of prostitution, and changes to the ‘anti-smacking’ law—the opposition from religious conservatives likewise intensified.²⁸ As Clark acknowledges, she often campaigned on issues ‘a little ahead of public opinion at the time . . . yet so often today’s avant-garde becomes tomorrow’s status quo.’²⁹ These liberal moral policies were perceived by some as complicating parliament’s alignment with the country’s ‘nominal Christianity.’³⁰ For Destiny Church, a Pentecostal movement with a significant Māori and Pasifika membership, Labour’s social reforms epitomised the ‘moral decline of New Zealand society.’³¹ Consequently, the years of Clark’s government fostered an affinity between the National Party and conservative Christian communities. ³²However, both major parties’ shift towards a moderate political ethic over the last decade has created an opening on the right for a socially conservative, Christian-inflected politics to emerge in opposition.

Alongside the waning religious capital of the major parties, as a result of the neoliberal transformation of Aotearoa New Zealand society, the

26 Dolores Janiewski, ‘From Moral Crusaders to New Conservatives—The Evolution of New Zealand’s Christian Religious Right, 1970–2021’, in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds. Matthew Cunningham, Marinus La Rooij, and Paul Spoonley (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 240.

27 Janiewski, ‘From Moral Crusaders to New Conservatives’, 244–248.

28 Sam Eichblatt, ‘View from the Top’, *Sunday*, 2009, 17.

29 Helen Clark, ‘Valedictory Statement to Parliament’, New Zealand Parliament, Wellington, 8 April, 2009.

30 Peter Lineham, ‘The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church’, in *Mana Māori and Christianity*, eds. Hugh Morrison, Lachy Paterson, Brett Knowles, and Murray Rae (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2012), 106.

31 Mawson, ‘Believing in Protest’, 205.

32 Peter Lineham, ‘Government Support of the Churches in the Modern Era’, in *God and Government: The New Zealand Experience*, eds. Rex Adhar and John Stenhouse (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2000), 43.

weakening of the alliance between the Labour Party and the Māori spiritual and political movement Rātana has also shaped the relationship between politics and religion today. For the greater part of a century, Labour and Rātana have cultivated alliances and connections with varying degrees of formality.³³ This long and uneasy relationship needs to be understood in light of Rātana's early history as a syncretic Māori Christian movement, holding both spiritual and political ambitions, which emerged in the early twentieth century. In the face of European 'onslaught', spirituality more generally assisted in fostering a pan-Māori identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁴ For both missionaries and certain Māori communities, the parallels between Māori ways of life and 'the Hebrew customs and traditions in the Old Testament' were obvious, epitomised in 'the view that religion and politics were inseparable'.³⁵ From this foundation, Tahupotiki Wiremu Rātana's movement was born, bringing together a dual mission of spiritual fulfilment and the advancement of Māori politics.³⁶ Prophetic and charismatic, Rātana sought to unify Māori in a pan-tribal movement, arguing that cohesion was critical to finding full recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi.³⁷

With over a third of the Māori population members of the Rātana church by 1936, a desire soon blossomed to see the movement represented by Māori voices within government, and a formal alliance with the Labour Party was declared. This alliance assisted Rātana in capturing all four Māori seats in 1943, seats that they held for the next fifty years.³⁸ A major achievement of this alliance was the 1975 inception of the Treaty of Waitangi Act, spearheaded by Rātana member and Labour MP Matiu Rata.³⁹ Despite

33 Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet*, 110.

34 Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 'Preface', in *Māori and Social Issues*, eds. Tracey McIntosh and Malcolm Mulholland (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011), vii.

35 Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet*, 14.

36 Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet*, 74.

37 Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet*, 121.

38 New Zealand History, 'Rātana and Labour Seal Alliance, 22 April 1936', New Zealand History (website), accessed 3 February, 2021.

39 Aaron Smale, 'Rātana: Church, State and Whanau', *New Zealand Geographic*, Jan–Feb 2009.

such successes, mounting dissatisfaction from Māori MPs who were unable to fully advance their politics within the Labour caucus led to friction and dissolution.⁴⁰ As Ranginui Walker argues, the agreement between Rātana and Labour ultimately placed Māori MPs in a ‘subaltern’ position, both within the party and parliament at large, that ‘merely legitimated the hegemony of the ruling class’.⁴¹ Māori voters, alongside their representatives, grew tired of Labour’s ‘lukewarm’ policies that failed to meaningfully address the crisis of achieving economic prosperity through the ‘exploitation of Crown resources such as land, waterways and forests acquired in violation of the Treaty’.⁴²

Rātana reconfigured the relationship between Māori religion, Māori politics, and the institutions of the New Zealand state, and the movement continues to have influence today.⁴³ At the height of its power, Rātana was dominant in the religious left, a space that has since been unoccupied by a coherent political movement. Recognising the decline of the Rātana-Labour alliance, however, is not to suggest that it fertilised the growth of the religious right. Rather, it is to ask about the location of religion in the politics of Aotearoa New Zealand. It’s clear that narratives which strictly separate spiritual and public life are inadequate accounts of our local context.⁴⁴ But if religion isn’t represented by overt spiritual-political movements like Rātana, we might wonder where it is. The parliamentary landscape may well be quietly absorbing some of these voices, but it seems likely that other voices could be finding themselves in additional forms of organising, removed from the mainline conversation.

40 Jane Kelsey, *A Question of Honour? Labour and The Treaty 1984–1989* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin New Zealand, 1990), 17.

41 Ranginui Walker, ‘Māori Conceptions of Leadership and Self Determination’, in *Political Leadership in New Zealand*, eds. Raymond Miller and Michael Mintrom (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006), 140.

42 Kelsey, *A Question of Honour?*, 18.

43 Jack Vowles, Hilde Coffé and Jennifer Curtin, *Bark but No Bite: Inequality and the 2014 General Election* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 224.

44 Philip Fountain, ‘The Political Theology of Covid Governance’, *Counterfutures* 14 (2023): 145–169; Geoff Troughton and Philip Fountain, ‘An Insecure Secularity? Religion, Decolonisation and Diversification in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 112, no. 5 (2023): 529–542.

If the collapse of the Labour-Rātana alliance ended a coherent movement of the religious left, then the inception of the MMP system in 1993 created fertile ground for the emergence of more marginal voices in religious politics. It is important to note, first of all, that the introduction of MMP was linked to public backlash against those sweeping market reforms undertaken by the Fourth Labour Government.⁴⁵ Dissatisfied with the results of those policies and alarmed by the speed at which they were enacted, public opinion called for a system of government that was more balanced, accountable, and representative.⁴⁶ MMP marks a shift from ‘traditional, class-based allegiances’ to a wider variety of values-based allegiances’ by divesting power from the major political players by assuring small parties parliamentary representation without the requirement to win an electorate seat.⁴⁷ Alongside an increasing parliamentary presence of women and ethnic minorities, small parties proliferated under MMP, transforming from political mavericks to necessary coalition partners.⁴⁸ While MMP may have given these parties a viable platform on which to compete—allowing small Christian groups to foster political support and establish campaigns—it has not equated to electoral success.⁴⁹ The short history of MMP is littered with the carcasses of floundering Christian political movements, with their poor organisational skills, ‘all-or-nothing attitude’, and alienation from discussions with prospective partners contributing to their electoral failures.⁵⁰ While MMP continues to develop a representational platform for Māori and Pasifika

45 Jonathan Boston and Roger Douglas, ‘Entrenching “Rogernomics” in New Zealand: Political and Academic Perspectives’, in *Delivering Policy Reform: Anchoring Significant Reforms in Turbulent Times*, eds. Evert Lindquist, Sam Vincent, and John Wanna (Canberra: ANU Press, 2011), 102.

46 Philip A Joseph, ‘MMP and the Constitution’, *New Zealand Journal of Public and International Law* 7, no. 1 (2009), 123.

47 Matthew Cunningham, Marinus La Rooij, and Paul Spoonley, ‘Introduction: Exploring Radical Intolerance and Extremism in New Zealand’, in *Histories of Hate*, 31.

48 Miller, ‘Minor Party Leadership’, 118–119.

49 Raymond Miller, ‘Minor Parties and the Religious Right’, in *New Zealand Government and Politics*, ed. Raymond Miller (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006), 431.

50 Miller, ‘Minor Parties’, 418.

in Aotearoa New Zealand's parliament, the evolving picture of Christian politics suggests that there remains a not-insignificant population within and beyond those communities who continue to be ideologically unrepresented. Neither the traditional philosophies of the Christian right, nor the secular ethics of the major parties fill such a void. MMP creates fertile ground for the sprouting of an alternative.

The 2020 General Election: Introducing the Minor Parties of the 'Religious Right'

With the three factors discussed above in mind, I will look in-depth at four Christian parties that ran in the 2020 General Election, three of which were first-time contenders. What follows is a brief introduction to the personalities, histories, and ideologies of the New Conservative Party, Vision New Zealand, One Party, and Advance New Zealand. Methodologically, this study presents analysis based on publicly available policy statements from the parties themselves, as well as their engagement with and representation in the media.

The roots of the New Conservative Party can be traced through a thirty-year history of Christian political parties.⁵¹ United Future is the most significant of these, which, under the leadership of Peter Dunne in the early 2000s, became the only party with transparent Christian commitments to enter parliament.⁵² When United Future supported the new 'anti-smacking' legislation in 2007 and refused to identify as a thoroughgoing Christian organisation, the Pentecostal wing of the party formed the Kiwi Party.⁵³ In a rare moment of collaboration for the Christian Right, the leadership of the Kiwi Party subsumed themselves into the Conservative Party for the

51 The New Conservatives, 'New Conservatives Policy', New Conservatives (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

52 New Zealand Parliament, 'Peter Dunne', New Zealand Parliament (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

53 Lineham, 'The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church', 147.

2011 election.⁵⁴ After their tarnished reputation following the leadership of disgraced businessman Colin Craig, the rechristened ‘New’ Conservatives underwent a significant rebrand for the 2017 election, emphasising their ‘positive, practical policies.’⁵⁵ Under the leadership of Leighton Baker and deputy Elliot Ikilei, the New Conservatives campaigned on family values, traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality education, prison reform, loosening firearm regulations, and a hard-neoliberal economic agenda.⁵⁶ While the New Conservatives do not advertise an explicit Christian identity, they envision Aotearoa New Zealand as ‘the combination of Democracy and Judeo-Christian principles’, which they would ‘uphold’ against ‘conflicting jurisdictional authorit[ies]’ like ‘Sharia Law.’⁵⁷ These appeals to ‘principles’ rather than beliefs speaks to the limited attraction to zealous religious politics in Aotearoa New Zealand, but the rhetoric is also clearly marked by a white Christian nationalism imported from abroad.

Vision New Zealand is led by Hannah Tamaki, pastor and senior minister of Destiny Church, a major Pentecostal movement with a strong Māori and Pasifika membership.⁵⁸ Hannah Tamaki has been a significant force in the church’s spiritual, social, and political ambitions for decades. Prominent, divisive, and, to many, socially repugnant, Hannah Tamaki and her husband, the self-styled Apostle Bishop Brian Tamaki, are the brazen forefront of a Māori-led Pentecostalism that combines flamboyant displays of prosperity theology with ‘transformational’ developmental activism.⁵⁹ The disjunction between the ostentatious wealth of church leadership and the socio-economic disadvantages of tithing Destiny congregants is central to the largely unfavourable view of this community in the public eye. Destiny

54 The Kiwi Party, ‘Kiwi Party Members Join The Conservative Party’, National Library Archive, accessed 5 February, 2021.

55 Conservative Party, ‘Conservative Party to Get New Name’, Press Release, *Scoop*, 12 December, 2017.

56 New Conservatives, ‘Policy’.

57 The New Conservatives, ‘Religion and Culture Policy’, New Conservatives (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

58 Destiny Church, ‘Leaders’, Destiny Church (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

59 Lineham, ‘The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church’, 53.

Church were politically active long before their forays into party politics, with an earlier iteration of Vision New Zealand exemplified in the Destiny Party, a reactionary group pitted against the liberal morality of Helen Clark's 2003–2008 Labour government.⁶⁰ As Ann Hardy argues, the capricious, moralistic quality to the Destiny Party meant that their 'opinions [were] readily dismissed as hyperbolic and absurd; indeed, for many, the religious worldview behind them [was] regressive to the point of being repellent'.⁶¹ Born out of perceived governmental failures to both address Māori issues and uphold a Christian identity, Destiny Party was defined in sharp contrast to other conservative Christian organisations by their 'strong Māori platform'. Peter Lineham suggests that while many of Destiny's policies—including those centred on families, police, and education—appealed to the average 'middle-class Christian', those focused on redressing for colonial wrongs and attending to the Treaty of Waitangi were more unpopular. Though Destiny Party imagined themselves as building a coalition of Christian Pākehā, Māori, and Pasifika that would find success in being attuned to colonialism as much as conservative family values, voters chose other avenues through which they could pursue such concerns. Richard Lewis maintains that had the Māori Party not been formed, Destiny would have gained a parliamentary foothold in the Māori electorates, but this conclusion overestimates the reach of the movement.⁶² The splintered vote on the Christian Right—Destiny had significant political overlap with Christian Heritage, United Future, and National—meant that the party had little real traction outside the circles of the Church itself.⁶³

In 2020, the revamped Vision New Zealand campaigned on a platform emphasising Tamaki's political potential as someone who 'work[s] and

60 Mawson, 'Believing in Protest', 207.

61 Ann Hardy, 'Reporting on Evangelical Christian Protest in the New Zealand Media: The Case for Training in Religious Journalism', *Australian Journalism Review* 29, no. 1 (2007), 64.

62 Lineham, 'The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church', 149–151.

63 Lineham, 'The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church', 157.

walk[s] every day with the people on the ground'.⁶⁴ Clearly articulated policy documents in practical, secular language fill the Vision New Zealand website, and yet the media scrutinised Tamaki's religion and marriage instead of her policy and relevant experience.⁶⁵ It is telling that the Wellington-based organisation 'Policy' defines Hannah Tamaki only in relation to her husband and his leadership of Destiny Church, when no such personal details are examined for any other party leader on their online platform.⁶⁶ While 'hard-right views on immigration, homosexuality and abortion' are mentioned in Policy's short introduction to the party, their flagship policy of Mana Motuhake—Māori self-determination—does not make the cut.⁶⁷ Despite their critiques of the present political order, challenges to ongoing colonial injustices, and strategies for constitutional and structural reform, Hannah Tamaki and Vision struggled to be heard.

Registering in 2020, the One Party were the only party to campaign as a Christian voice.⁶⁸ Led by Stephanie Harawira and Edward Shanly, the One Party offers a diverse selection of Christian representatives united by their oversight from an Apostolic Council.⁶⁹ Harawira stood for the left-wing Mana party in Tamaki Makaurau in 2011, campaigning as a representative of urban Māori and an experienced community leader in Waitakere.⁷⁰ Harawira was a member of the Te Whanau o Waipareira Trust Board for several years, a prominent Māori non-profit in West Auckland.⁷¹ The One Party has a clear relationship to Harawira's background in the NGO sector; the party's

64 Hannah Tamaki, 'A Voice for the Silent Majority', interview by Lisa Owen, *RNZ Checkpoint*, 23 May, 2019.

65 Vision New Zealand, '2020 Policy', Vision New Zealand (website), accessed 5 February, 2021; Tamaki, 'A Voice for the Silent Majority'

66 Vision New Zealand, 'Policy'.

67 Vision New Zealand, 'Policy'.

68 One Party, 'FAQ', One Party (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

69 Alex Braae, 'A Revelation in Marton: The Spinoff Meets New Zealand's Newest Christian Party', *The Spinoff*, 18 August, 2020.

70 Mana Party, 'Harawira Runs for Tamaki Makaurau', Press Release, *Scoop*, 7 September, 2011.

71 Eva Corlett, 'Waipareira Trust Board Elections Show Enthusiasm for the Future', *Stuff*, 8 December, 2015.

mental health policy even cites the success of the Te Whanau o Waipareira model.⁷² The One Party's political identity is difficult to pinpoint, combining a libertarian economic agenda, a radically high value placed on improving conditions for the disadvantaged, especially Māori, and a conservative Christian perspective on conscience issues.⁷³ Travelling the country's marae with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Bible, the One Party echoes Rātana's dual political and spiritual mission.⁷⁴ The One Party's unabashed Christianity and bicultural profile are unique in a political climate that favours the suppression of religious identities.

Advance New Zealand, co-led by musician Billy Te Kahika and disgraced former National MP Jami-Lee Ross, is a conspiracy-focused, anti-establishment party that presented for the first time in 2020. Te Kahika began the New Zealand Public Party—later subsumed into Advance New Zealand—on the back of his immense social media following.⁷⁵ Concerned by institutional overreach in the wake of the pandemic, Te Kahika espouses populist, nationalist rhetoric of 'taking back' the country and returning it to 'the people', building a movement that pits the wider public against decision-making elites.⁷⁶ Capitalising on the 'productive ambiguity' of appeals to 'the people', Advance may be situated as engaging with both the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' axes of Rogers Brubaker's framework for analysing the political terrain of nationalism and populism.⁷⁷ Te Kahika invokes 'the people' both horizontally, as a bounded cultural community that needs protection from an external threat, and vertically, as a sovereign social organ to whom power and

72 One Party, 'Mental Health', One Party (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

73 One Party, 'Economy', One Party (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

74 Te Ao—Māori News, 'New Political Party Combines te Tiriti and Bible into One', *Te Ao—Māori News*, 10 August, 2020; Keith Newman, 'Story: Rātana Church—Te Haahi Rātana', *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed 10 February, 2021.

75 Dean Nathan, 'New Zealand Public Party Kicks Off', *Te Ao—Māori News*, 12 June, 2020.

76 Nathan, 'New Zealand Public Party Kicks Off'.

77 Rogers Brubaker, 'Populism and Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (2020), 44.

resources ought to be restored, reclaimed from political elites.⁷⁸

The ideological foundation of the merger between Ross' Advance New Zealand and Te Kahika's Public Party is a shared concern for 'sovereignty' and 'freedom'.⁷⁹ In its nationalist imperatives, Advance New Zealand shares some political commonality with New Zealand First.⁸⁰ However, Winston Peters immediately declined to work with the party, citing their peddling of conspiracy theories as a 'serious danger . . . especially in the Māori and Polynesian world'.⁸¹ Following the precedent set in the United States but inflecting it with his brand of Māori worldview, Te Kahika's approach to conspiracy espouses a fusion of Christian allusion, political rhetoric, and a pervasive denial of evidence in ways that found traction among particular Māori and Pasifika communities.⁸² Unlike the other parties of this study, Te Kahika and Ross facilitated a type of 'big tent' politics, whereby promoting direct democracy invited a broad base of views on conscience issues.⁸³ Volatile, compelling, and even dangerous, the phenomenon of Advance New Zealand thwarts expectations of religious entanglements in the nation's politics.

Having outlined the genealogy of these four parties, I want to turn now to analysing these parties' views on policy, with a specific focus on health reform (through the referenda and COVID-19 policy), Māori politics, and foreign policy, particularly as it pertains to Aotearoa New Zealand's relationship with Israel. An analysis of these three policy arenas allows us to examine these parties' attempts to find a position for religious voices within Aotearoa New

78 Brubaker, 'Populism and Nationalism', 49.

79 Brubaker, 'Populism and Nationalism', 49.

80 Jack Vowles and Mona Krewel, 'Negative Campaigning, Fake News, and Half-Truths among the Minor Parties. And the Question is: is Advance New Zealand Really "Populist"?', Election 2020, Victoria University of Wellington, accessed 8 February, 2021.

81 Winston Peters, 'Winston Peters Says he Turned Down Offer to Join Forces with Advance New Zealand Party', interview with *One News*, TVNZ, 16 September, 2020.

82 Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 40.

83 Advance New Zealand, 'Democracy Policy', Advance New Zealand (website), accessed 6 February, 2021.

Zealand's politics.⁸⁴

Health Policy

The 2020 election was exceptional for the presence at the ballot box of two divisive referenda on euthanasia and cannabis legislation. While the 2019 End of Life Choice Act received majority support, the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill narrowly failed. 2020 saw vitriolic backlash to the referenda's aims, in much the same way as minor Christian politics ran in a reactionary parallel to those morally progressive, Clark-led governments. Religious communities, Christian political parties, and independent organisations produced swathes of campaign material, which proved surprisingly influential.⁸⁵ Green Party MP Chlöe Swarbrick, for instance, identifies the 'misinformation' of the 'Say Nope to Dope' campaign—organised by the conservative Christian lobby group Family First—as engendering public discomfort with reform and contributing to the negative result of the Cannabis Legalisation referendum.⁸⁶ It is clear, therefore, that Christian lobbyists, politicians, and organisations had influence in the referenda that resonated far beyond their own communities.

New Conservatives and Vision New Zealand adopted firm stances against both possible reforms, seeing the reforms as charting the moral direction of the nation into dangerous waters. These parties emphasised the sanctity of life by linking their opposition to the referenda to the 2020 Abortion Legislation Act, shifting their discourse closer to the battleground of the United States' conservative Christian movement.⁸⁷ Vision New Zealand vilified what they labelled the three 'KILL BILLS' that sought to 'kill our babies, brains and

84 NZ Catholic Staff, 'Faith leaders concerned at EOLC Bill', *NZCatholic*, 19 December, 2019.

85 Family First, 'Value Your Vote: Voters Guide 2020', Value Your Vote (website), accessed 5 February, 2021.

86 Chlöe Swarbrick, 'Chlöe Swarbrick's Message to Cannibals Haters', interview by Simon Shepherd, *Newshub Nation*, 31 October, 2020.

87 Andrew R. Lewis, 'First, Do No Harm: Abortion and Healthcare Opposition', in *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 59–85.

bedridden.⁸⁸ In less scathing language, the New Conservatives expressed the same policy aims.⁸⁹ Neither expressed their opposition to abortion, euthanasia, or cannabis in religious terms. Rather, medicalised language juxtaposing the value of human life against images of the aborted fetus as a piece of excisable ‘tissue’, or allusions to the ‘safety’ and ‘secrecy’ of the ‘mother’s womb’, permeated their rhetoric.⁹⁰ Compelling parallels exist between this secular language of the womb’s ‘safety’ and a theology of ‘Mary’s womb as a microcosm of creation... as sacrament.’⁹¹ While avoiding explicit appeals to Christian moralities, using these echoes of familiar theologies ensures that the parties’ messages are clear to receptive audiences.

We might ask why these groups turn to inflection over frankness in such circumstances—are statements of sacred ethics just unnecessary, or is there something pernicious about the political climate that makes direct appeals to faith unwise? As was evident with Christopher Luxon’s rise to the National Party leadership and Prime Ministership, manoeuvres into, around, and away from questions of faith continue to prod at the constraints on these conversations.⁹² The New Conservatives and Vision New Zealand opposed reform by drawing on the traditional moral battleground of the Christian right, but without an explicitly religious approach.

Conversely to the New Conservatives and Vision New Zealand, the One Party was very clear about their religious imperatives.⁹³ Identifying as a ‘New Zealand strategic alliance for the body of Christ’, One Party’s

88 Vision New Zealand, ‘The Three Big Kill Bills’, Vision New Zealand (website), accessed 9 February, 2021.

89 New Conservatives, ‘Policy’..

90 Family First, ‘Value your Vote’, 18; Vision New Zealand, ‘The Three Big Kills Bills’; The New Conservatives, ‘Abortion Policy’, New Conservatives (website), accessed 10 February, 2021.

91 Lyn Holness, ‘Mary’s Womb as the “Space Within Our Space for the Gestating Son of God”’, *Religion and Theology* 16 (2009), 26.

92 Christopher Luxon, ‘Maiden Statements’, New Zealand Parliament, 24 March, 2021.

93 One Party, ‘FAQ’.

messaging stems from a clear Christian ethic.⁹⁴ While their social media laments at the ‘moral decline’ of the country and calls for zealous supporters to ‘VOTE KINGDOM’, they presented a nuanced, progressive approach to policy.⁹⁵ While opposing the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill, One Party advocated for decriminalisation and presented a range of health-based policies for drug reform.⁹⁶ Harawira’s background—as an activist, community worker, and former candidate for the left-wing Mana party—clearly remains significant for One Party’s policy. Stepping away from the emotionally charged Vision New Zealand rhetoric of euthanasia as ‘murder’, One Party temperately understood euthanasia as a practice that ‘devalues life’ and instead suggested increased funding for palliative care and support for families caring for the terminally ill.⁹⁷ While audaciously Christian, the One Party’s policy, especially around drug reform, departs from mainline evangelical conservatism that would consider drug use indicative of individual, social, and moral decay.⁹⁸ With a uniquely prophetic Christianity, the One Party belies expectations associated with Christian nationalism.

Unlike the other parties, Advance New Zealand did not have formal policies on either of the referenda, asserting that ‘we respect the variety of views New Zealanders hold about issues of conscience’.⁹⁹ Unlike the New Conservatives, Vision New Zealand, and the One Party, Advance New Zealand did not express outrage at the moral direction of the country’s social legislation. Instead, their ‘big tent’ structure for safeguarding

94 One Party, ‘One Party: Church, YOU ARE THE KINGMAKER!’, *YouTube*, 15 September, 2020.

95 One Party, ‘Cannabis Reform’, One Party (website), accessed 9 February, 2021.

96 One Party, ‘Cannabis Reform’.

97 Vision New Zealand, ‘The Three Kill Bills’; One Party, ‘Euthanasia’, One Party (website), accessed 9 February, 2021.

98 Andrew Monteith, *Christian Nationalism and the Birth of the War on Drugs* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

99 Advance New Zealand, ‘Advance NZ Position on Abortion’, Advance New Zealand (website), accessed 9 February, 2021.

personal freedoms serves to condemn perceived abuses of power by public institutions.¹⁰⁰ As Finn Hogan describes, Advance New Zealand foregrounds themes of individual sovereignty and government overreach, capitalising on anxieties around both local and international responses to COVID-19.¹⁰¹ Analysing their social media presence, Hogan found that Advance New Zealand, despite only being a political player for a few weeks, was well surpassing the online engagement figures of both Labour and National by the end of August 2020.¹⁰² Linking into broader international trends, Advance New Zealand's conspiratorial outlooks (or as Te Kahika terms it, 'critical thinking') on authority and intervention spread their messages more quickly and deeply to a broader audience than traditional voices.¹⁰³

Advance New Zealand's broad-church approach to policy was evident at an anti-lockdown protest they organised in Auckland in September 2020.¹⁰⁴ Several thousand protesters marched, linked by an interest in protecting personal liberty and the rights of the individual. This spectrum of concerns—encompassing everything from the 5G rollout to paedophilia among the political elite—epitomised the conspiratorial, 'big tent' political potential of Advance New Zealand. Again, taking his lead from a brand of American political discourse that used to be foreign to New Zealand, Te Kahika fostered a language of nationalism, individualism, and faith.¹⁰⁵ His final words at one Wellington rally were: 'God bless New Zealand and make New Zealand great again!'.¹⁰⁶ Advance New Zealand's lack of formal policy

100 Advance New Zealand, 'About Us', Advance New Zealand (website), accessed 9 February, 2021.

101 New Zealand Public Party, 'Billy TK LIVE on Newshub via the Vinny Eastwood Show', *You Tube*, 29 August, 2020.

102 New Zealand Public Party, 'Billy TK LIVE'.

103 Richard Stein, Oana Ometa, Sarah Pachtman Shetty, Adi Katz, Mircea Ionut Popitiu, and Robert Brotherton, 'Conspiracy Theories in the Era of COVID-19: A Tale of Two Pandemics', *International Journal of Clinical Practice* 75, no. 2 (2020), 2.

104 RNZ, 'Advance Party and Crowd Rallies against Covid-19 Restrictions and Lockdown', *RNZ*, 12 September 2020.

105 Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 40–55.

106 New Zealand Public Party, 'Reclaim NZ for ALL the People! Billy Te Kahika, Advance NZ', *You Tube*, 7 August, 2020.

was its greatest source of power. Its marriage of faith and subversion was a provocative force against mainline New Zealand politics. Unengaged with the referenda issues and disenchanted from traditional political concerns, Advance New Zealand refused to play on the establishment's turf.

Māori Politics

The diverse policy ideas of these four parties were further evident in their approaches to Māori politics. Christianity has a long Māori history, at times acting as a vehicle for Māori spiritual and political goals.¹⁰⁷ And yet, Christian political parties have radically different relationships to Māori voters and vast cleavages exist between their conceptions of Māori policy.¹⁰⁸ While churches have 'long been active in policy advice to government on Māori and bi-cultural issues', an 'uneasy tension' has surfaced between 'ethnic, cultural, political and historical characteristics', producing a variety of political stances from Christian political parties.¹⁰⁹ Lineham argues that religio-political Māori movements 'stem from the endemic Māori struggle to find a secure place in Western capitalist society . . . [so] the development of a socially and politically active Christianity [is] a logical response'.¹¹⁰ Divergent Māori policies highlight a distinctive character to Aotearoa New Zealand's Christian politics that sets it apart from the international religious right.

Of the four parties, Vision New Zealand, through its connections to Destiny Church, has the most significant history of Māori advocacy. Established in 1998, Destiny Church is a 'proto-political populist campaign' that practices Māori-led faith and development, seeking transformational

107 Walker, 'Māori Conceptions of leadership and Self Determination', 138.

108 Miller, 'Minor Parties and the Religious Right', 423.

109 Peter Lineham, 'Social Policy and the Churches in the 1990s and Beyond', in *The Future of Christianity*, eds. John Stenhouse and Brett Knowles (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004), 152; Allan K. Davidson, 'Christianity and National Identity', in *The Future of Christianity*, 31.

110 Lineham, 'The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church', 117–118.

social and spiritual change for its congregants.¹¹¹ Simon Moetara analyses Destiny’s commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi as ‘a covenant between Māori and the Crown, with God as the third party’.¹¹² Vision New Zealand, though separate from Destiny Church, reflects a similar ethic in its emphasis on ‘the rights of Māori as tangata whenua’ and critique of the ‘systematic disempowerment, land alienation, economic impoverishment . . . and multi-level hegemonic racism’ that has pervaded Aotearoa New Zealand since colonisation. Vision New Zealand labels the current political system as ‘colonial and unsuitable’, and its flagship policy—‘Mana Motuhake’—concerns Māori self-determination. It aims to restore Māori trust in government and entrench Māori perspectives in political institutions by proposing the establishment of an Upper House to parliament that consists of all Māori members. Under their new constitutional arrangement, Māori would pursue self-determination in every aspect of society.¹¹³ As with the rest of their political messaging, Vision New Zealand does not articulate their Māori policies in religious terms. Rather, they proffer a secular analysis of Māori injustices alongside radical solutions.

Emphasising that ‘everyone has the right to live freely and undisturbed by government’, Advance New Zealand’s Billy Te Kahika similarly advocates for Māori self-determination.¹¹⁴ The party argue that proper recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi and the 1835 Declaration of Independence would ensure that ‘ALL Peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand are sovereign’. Under Advance New Zealand, political power would be decentralised, allowing local communities, especially Hapū, to self-govern.¹¹⁵ It was interesting to

111 Lineham, ‘The Rise and Significance of the Destiny Church’, 122.

112 Simon Moetara, ‘Māori and Pentecostal Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand’, in *Mana Māori and Christianity*, eds. Hugh Morrison, Lachy Paterson, Brett Knowles, and Murray Rae (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2012), 82.

113 Vision New Zealand, ‘MANA MOTUHAKE: Flagship Policy’, Vision New Zealand (website), accessed 11 February, 2021.

114 Billy Te Kahika, ‘Billy Te Kahika interviewed’, interview by Sam Hudson, *This Quality*, 2 September 2020.

115 Advance New Zealand, ‘Maori Policy Overview’, Advance New Zealand (website), accessed 11 February, 2021.

observe the political commonalities between Advance New Zealand and Te Pāti Māori on the issue of tino rangatiratanga in the *Newshub* Te Tai Tokerau debate in September 2020. Where Labour's Kelvin Davis advocated for Māori concerns to be advanced through the existing systems of government, Te Kahika and Te Pāti Māori candidate Mariameno Kapa-Kingi argued that radical reconfigurations of state power must be enacted.¹¹⁶ While Advance New Zealand's Māori sovereignty policies resonate with both Te Pāti Māori and Vision New Zealand, Te Kahika outlined a faith-based foundation for this policy that set him apart: it is 'very much a Biblical perspective . . . freedom of conscience, freedom to live undisturbed with your whanau'.¹¹⁷

Te Kahika's interweaving of Christianity, te ao Māori, and politics was compelling, and according to Tina Ngata, it enabled Te Kahika to 'move conspiracy theories from white supremacist minds to Māori mouths'.¹¹⁸ Ngata argues that 'Māori trauma over colonial invasion, and political dispossession, can ferment into xenophobic anxiety', which transformed a sovereignty discourse into something altogether more sinister.¹¹⁹ Advance New Zealand's Māori sovereignty policy must be considered as part of a broader nationalist ideology, with its combination of theology, te ao Māori, and politics a powerful force in the party's target electorates.

While Vision New Zealand and Advance New Zealand sought to establish a 'by Māori, for Māori' approach at every level of Aotearoa New Zealand's public sector, One Party foregrounded a model of cooperation. Arguing that Māori and Pākehā are bound together by a common Christianity, One Party's foundational principle was unity. While Vision New Zealand and Advance New Zealand regarded the Treaty of Waitangi as a document that ensures Māori sovereignty and self-determination, One Party recognised the Treaty as 'a symbol of co-leadership, of co-governance

116 *Newshub*, 'Te Tai Tokerau debate with Kelvin Davis, Billy Te Kahika Jr, Miriameno Kapa-Kingi', *YouTube*, 29 September, 2020.

117 Te Kahika, 'Billy Te Kahika interviewed'.

118 Tina Ngata, 'The Rise of Māori MAGA', *E-Tangata*, 9 August, 2020.

119 Ngata, 'The Rise of Māori MAGA'.

in our land'.¹²⁰ Though having different policies on Māori sovereignty, One Party and Advance New Zealand both advocate for binding citizen-initiated referenda, because they considered the sharing of decision-making power amongst citizens to be the proper exercise of democracy.¹²¹ We might wonder if there exists a tension between One Party's calls for a bicultural Christian 'Kingdom' at the heart of government, overseen by an Apostolic council, and a constitutional overhaul by which power would be disseminated to the citizenry. This promise of strong Christian co-governance in combination with referenda's amplification of individual voices appeals to a particular synthesis of nationalist unity and sovereign individualism.

Meanwhile, New Conservatives claimed they would repeal all 'race-based co-governance agreements that have been built into legislation, recognising that New Zealand has one sovereign government and democratic process'. They sought to disestablish the Waitangi Tribunal, Māori electorates, and review 'all race-based funding'. Deploying a logic that co-governance assumed a 'lack of capability in that collective [Māori] identity', New Conservatives asserted that policies of 'segregation' must be abolished in order for Māori potential to be respected and realised.¹²² The rhetoric of New Conservatives in the 2020 General Election campaign echoed the former National leader Don Brash's infamous Orewa speech of 2004, in which he condemned 'a society of Pākehā and Māori where the minority has a birth right to the upper hand'. Brash and New Conservative decried government-funded initiatives that were 'influenced not just by need—as [they] should be—but also by the ethnicity of the recipient'.¹²³ It

120 One Party, 'Tangata Whenua policy', One Party (website), accessed 12 February, 2021.

121 One Party, 'Constitutional Policy', One Party (website), accessed 10 February, 2021; Advance New Zealand, 'Democracy Policy', Advance New Zealand (website), accessed 10 February, 2021.

122 The New Conservatives, 'Treaty of Waitangi Policy', New Conservatives (website), accessed 10 February, 2021.

123 Don Brash, 'Nationhood', speech at Orewa Rotary Club, 27 January, 2004, New Zealand National Party.

is not surprising that New Conservatives were, and still are, closely linked to the lobby group Hobson's Pledge, established by Brash in 2016.¹²⁴ Brash's Orewa speech catapulted National up 17% in the 2004 polls; the New Conservatives could be seen as trying to tap into political success of that same Pākehā-driven anxiety in their 2020 campaign.¹²⁵

These New Conservative policies were advanced by Elliot Ikilei, a Māori- and Pasifika-identifying voice within 2020's conservative movement.¹²⁶ Taking up the legacy of Winston Peters, a prominent Māori voice against state-led Māori provisions, Ikilei appealed to conservative Māori and Pasifika dissatisfied with the status quo.¹²⁷ While not outlining policy in Christian terms, Ikilei's assertion that the restoration of the family unit, especially the place of fathers, would improve outcomes for Māori and Pasifika communities was a telling appeal to religious conservatism.¹²⁸ The New Conservatives' model was of a race-blind nation stabilised and made prosperous by conservative family values.

The rhetoric of the New Conservatives in 2020 anticipated many of defining issues of the 2023 General Election. The party's positioning of a conservative Māori- and Pasifika-identifying figurehead as a mouthpiece of their arguments in Elliot Ikilei similarly prefigures the rise, or return, of Winston Peters, Shane Jones, Shane Reti, and David Seymour to prominence. Ngata argues that Māori leadership within ACT, New Zealand First, and National in the coalition government formed in November 2023 speaks to the rootedness of white conservatism in Aotearoa New Zealand's political system.¹²⁹ For Ngata, the highly racialised politics coming out of the 2023 General Election, and its 'hostile anti-Māori government', have emerged because 'we believed the fiction that white conservatism only

124 The New Conservatives, 'New Conservative—From Strength to Strength', New Conservatives (website), 22 January, 2019.

125 New Zealand Herald, 'Poll puts National ahead of Labour', *New Zealand Herald*, 15 February, 2004.

126 The New Conservatives, 'Elliot on Racism', *YouTube*, 3 June, 2020.

127 Winston Peters, Facebook (post), 16 July 2017, 11.55am.

128 New Conservatives, 'Elliot on Racism',

129 Tina Ngata, 'How Did We get Here?', Tina Ngata (website), 7 January, 2024.

exists on the extreme right, rather than across the entire western political spectrum'.¹³⁰ As I examined the policies of the New Conservatives as they unfolded in 2020, there was something that felt exceptional about them in the climate of the time. However, to look at those same policies today is to see elements of an ideology normalised, and indeed, pursued by the current coalition government. I would suggest that such a shift highlights not the raw popularity of these policies, but rather the inability of the left in Aotearoa New Zealand to imagine and articulate a compelling anti-racist alternative.

Aotearoa New Zealand's Christian political parties navigated Māori policy in the 2020 General Election in a multitude of ways. However, all appealed strongly to imperatives of nationalism. Whether in thinking of Māori, like Vision New Zealand, as self-governing, or, like the New Conservatives, as integrated into a 'Judeo-Christian' society, all these parties delved into perennial theological questions around the sovereign positioning of individuals in relation to God.¹³¹ Though not rooted in Christian language, these parties' policies offered visions of Māori spiritual and political destiny. Christian nationalism resonated through these four parties; and yet, it was not always a *white-supremacist* Christian nationalism. The long-term and acute threats of white-supremacist politics obviously require attention, especially as Pākehā men represent the largest identity group in Aotearoa New Zealand's radical right.¹³² But these parties and their policies demonstrated that this 'religious right' has no simple relationships to ethnic identity or racial inclusion. Networks of indigenous actors, argues Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, can imagine inclusive communities based in cultural practices which 'unsettle' hierarchical, state-like models of the nation and prevent sovereignty discourses from replicating their practices

130 Ngata, 'How Did We get Here?'

131 Kristen Deede Johnson, 'Review of *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*, by Jean Bethle Elshstain', *Politics and Religion* 3, no. 3 (2010): 641–644.

132 Cunningham, La Rooij, Spoonley, 'Introduction', 39.

of exclusion and violence.¹³³ Goodyear-Ka'ōpua emphasises 'affinity across diversity' in ways that allow individual and groups with priorities that remain not-entirely aligned to act on this in solidarity.¹³⁴ When we refract the nationalisms of these political parties through this lens, we might locate some openings for conceivable progressive alliances which do not fall into the trappings of the religious right. These parties shaped a compelling and emergent narrative at the intersection of religion, politics, and indigeneity, one that could be used to develop a religious left in response.

Foreign Policy

Dominated as it was by debate over housing and the government's COVID-19 response strategy, foreign policy was not a focus of the 2020 General Election. However, minor Christian parties situated themselves within specific international movements and ideological identities, especially around Israel. For three of the parties discussed above, Aotearoa New Zealand's relationship to Israel was critical to their policy agenda. Whether through Zionism or anti-Semitic conspiracies, these parties spiritually, religiously, and ethnically linked Christian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand to Jewish communities in Israel. With the Israel-Hamas war beginning in October 2023, these local approaches have been thrown into an entirely new sphere of relevance in recent months. These parties' focus on Israel felt unusual in 2020, but what was a fringe policy priority at the time is now an urgent issue within the society and politics of Aotearoa New Zealand. Re-examining these parties' 2020 policy angles develops a textured backdrop to the divisions of the present and furthers our understanding of the tensions which underly what may well become an increasingly central and inflamed issue for mainstream politics in Aotearoa New Zealand.

One Party campaigned on an explicit Zionism, which they linked

133 Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 'Kuleana Lāhui: Collective Responsibility for Hawaiian Nationhood in Activists' Praxis', *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 5, no. 1 (2011), 131.

134 Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 'Kuleana Lāhui', 132–134.

indelibly to Māori spiritual history, describing their Israel policy as ‘non-negotiable’ and a ‘bottom line’. In fact, advocacy for stronger economic, political, and diplomatic ties with Israel was One Party’s *only* foreign policy agenda. Harawira argued that ‘our connection will always go back to Israel. . . unless we bless Israel who are the apple of God’s eye, we will not be blessed’.¹³⁵ One Party’s announcements were often accompanied by reference to ‘trumpets’, and the openings of their meetings at church halls and marae around the country were heralded by the calls of the Jewish shofar.¹³⁶ Both figuratively and literally, One Party trumpeted their policy with weighty spiritual symbolism, with Zionism bolstering the spiritual mission of One Party as a prophetic Christianity that transcended everyday politics. Furthermore, One Party presented an indigenous theology linking Māori and Jews to analogous spiritual and historical backgrounds. Harawira attested that ‘if anyone knows about occupation and being dispossessed of whenua, being removed from your rights and whakapapa . . . it’s Israel. We have a lot in common’. The Māori and Israeli flags flew together outside the marae that the One Party visited on the campaign trail, epitomising their conception of the links, ‘whenua to whenua’, between Māori as tangata whenua of Aotearoa and Jews as the people indelibly linked to the land of the Israeli state.¹³⁷

The linking of te ao Māori with Judaic culture has long precedence.¹³⁸ Indeed, the Rātana faith notably recognised commonalities between their historical and spiritual narratives.¹³⁹ However, there is no stable viewpoint: tensions flared in 2013 between Stephanie Harawira’s Ezekiel 33 Trust and the Mana Party—a left-wing movement that splintered

135 Kiwi Brainstorm, ‘Kiwi Brainstorm with Stefanie Harawira, Leader of One Party, New Zealand—Yifat & Eran’ *YouTube*, 16 July, 2020.

136 Braae, ‘A Revelation in Marton’.

137 Kiwi Brainstorm, ‘Kiwi Brainstorm with Stefanie Harawira’.

138 Sheree Trotter, ‘Ngāpuhi—Israeli Ties Strengthened’, Israel Institute of New Zealand (website), 26 October, 2020.

139 Newman, *Rātana: The Prophet*, 14.

from Te Pāti Māori—over Mana’s support of Palestinian rights.¹⁴⁰ Carrie Stoddard-Smith, a former candidate for Te Pāti Māori, questioned why the Mana movement allowed the Ezekiel 33 Trust to fly Israeli flags at their Waitangi Day event, arguing that ‘Māori and Palestinians have a shared understanding of colonial forces at work’ and that she opposes ‘the ongoing abuses of power perpetrated by the Israeli government to ethnically cleanse the state of Palestine’.¹⁴¹

Evidently, Israel remains a point of contention in Māori politics, particularly in light of the Israel-Hamas war. Voices drawing on their Māori identity to outline their positions sit on all sides of the debate. One such perspective is represented in the ‘Māori call for Palestine’, a petition which in calling for an end to Israel’s ‘illegal war of aggression’ draws parallels between the ‘acute’ experiences of colonial harm for Māori and the ‘occupation, blockade and continued confiscation of Palestinian lands’.¹⁴² This Māori-Palestinian solidarity is explored further in an insightful and conversational piece by Tameem Shaltoni and Tina Ngata.¹⁴³ An opposing perspective is found in the Indigenous Coalition for Israel, an ‘international Christian initiative’ directed by Alfred Ngaro and Sheree Trotter.¹⁴⁴ In a recent piece on the initiative’s website, Trotter reflects on the diversity of views within Māori communities, arguing that parliamentary Māori have presumed to speak for all on the Israel-Hamas war. Trotter decries the statements of Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, Marama Davidson, and Willie Jackson, arguing that they ‘demean Māori by standing on the side

140 Carrie Stoddard-Smith, ‘Waitangi Day Faux Pas—Mana what were you thinking?’, *Ellipsister*, 6 February, 2013.

141 Stoddard-Smith, ‘Waitangi Day Faux Pas’.

142 Action Station, ‘Māori Call for Palestine’, Action Station (website), accessed 9 April, 2024.

143 Tameem Shaltoni and Tina Ngata, ‘Respectful Solidarity: Standing Together against Colonialism, on Colonized Lands’, *The Pantograph Punch*, 9 December, 2023.

144 Indigenous Coalition for Israel, ‘Our People’, Indigenous Coalition for Israel (website), 9 April, 2024.

of barbarism and depravity’ in their criticisms of Israeli military force.¹⁴⁵ It seems that faith-based foundations continue to be significant in forming, for a certain Māori minority, their supportive perspectives on Israel policy and allyship.

The New Conservatives presented a detailed ‘New Zealand–Israel Relations Position Statement’, which echoed the One Party’s Christian Zionism. However, they did not engage with the issue as openly on the campaign trail; the full picture of Israel’s spiritual significance to the New Conservatives was incomplete. Despite their roots in Christian conservatism, they outlined their Israel policy without religious justification, arguing that ‘Israel is a sovereign nation and should be recognised as such’. The New Conservatives claimed they would pursue closer economic ties, establish an embassy, and financially incentivise ‘surrounding Arab nations’ to absorb Palestinian ‘refugees’. They did not further explain their policy beyond suggesting that a trade relationship with a sovereign Israel would be economically beneficial.¹⁴⁶

Departing from their policy documents’ temperate language, the New Conservatives’ appeals to ‘Judeo-Christian values’ against the threat of ‘Sharia Law’ represented an overture to the international radical right.¹⁴⁷ Toby Greene argues that the increasing European use of the term ‘Judeo-Christian’ embodies the political imperative to establish a common civilizational identity from which Islam is excluded. From the 1990s, the radical right began to express ‘solidarity with Jews’ against the perceived threat of Islam, bolstering a common civilisational identity and distancing these organisations from their own histories of anti-Semitism.¹⁴⁸ The New

145 Sheree Trotter, ‘The Māori View on Palestine’, Indigenous Coalition for Israel (website), 17 December, 2023.

146 The New Conservatives, ‘New Zealand-Israel Relations Position Statement’, New Conservatives (website), accessed 11 February, 2021.

147 The New Conservatives, ‘Religion and Culture Policy’, New Conservatives (website), accessed 11 February, 2021.

148 Toby Greene, ‘Judeo-Christian Civilizationism: Challenging Common European Foreign Policy in the Israeli-Palestinian Arena’, *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020), 6.

Conservatives do not have a discursive history that can be examined in the way that is possible for conservative political entities in Europe and the United States. However, the New Conservatives continue to take their lead from the white nationalism of the global radical right.

A more prominent voice in conservative politics than the maverick One Party, the New Conservatives were the subject of significant analysis by the Israel Institute, a think-tank led by David Cumin and Ashley Church. The Israel Institute presented their perspective on New Zealand-Israel relations in secular terms, citing the need for closer ties based on ‘economic reasons, reasons of social equity, political equity’.¹⁴⁹ The ‘faith or spiritual element’, as Church acknowledged, may be significant ‘for me and for some people’, and yet the think-tank insisted that those geopolitical reasons were more significant. Interestingly, the Israel Institute presented a very positive view of the New Conservatives in their party comparison tool in 2020, but in a video presentation, their panel advocated that ‘if you want to influence change in favour of Israel, get involved at the grassroot level in one of the two major parties’.¹⁵⁰ Evidently, the New Conservatives did not have the political traction to find the support of the Israel Institute, despite their favourable policy positions.

Where One Party and the New Conservatives were enthusiastic supporters of closer ties with Israel, Advance New Zealand’s Billy Te Kahika weaved anti-Semitic thinking into his conspiratorial narratives. In one of his popular Facebook Live ‘study’ videos, Te Kahika set out on an hour-long lecture outlining ‘how the nation of Israel was formed’ because ‘not many people know about it’.¹⁵¹ Paul Spoonley understands Te Kahika’s conspiratorial rhetoric as situating Jews at the heart of all ‘unravelling’ international affairs, highlighting Te Kahika’s emphasis on the ‘need [for] Jesus in our lives’, and his discussion of satanism, banking, the Jewish

149 Israel Institute of New Zealand, ‘The Israel Report—Live—The Voters’ Guide Part 1’, Israel Institute of New Zealand (website), 14 September, 2020.

150 Israel Institute of New Zealand, ‘The Voters Guide’.

151 Billy Te Kahika, ‘How the State of Israel was Formed’, Facebook (video), 4 June, 2020, 7.32 pm.

State, and a conspiracy to start a third World War.¹⁵² Te Kahika attempted to mask these anti-Semitic tropes with assertions that he ‘love[s] Israeli culture’ and ‘our Judaic history that we share with our relatives’.¹⁵³ Whether Te Kahika appealed to that connected history as Christian, Māori, or both, is unclear. The Israel Institute was alarmed by Te Kahika’s message, responding with a thirty-minute, fact-checking video presentation.¹⁵⁴ The organisation only produced three such videos for the election: one on the major parties, one examining all other relevant political candidates, and one on the conspiratorial disregard for the truth which lay at the heart of Billy Te Kahika’s politics.

Unlike the other three parties discussed here, foreign policy was not a focus for Vision New Zealand. As a parallel to their ‘immediate reset of New Zealand’s immigration policies’, Vision New Zealand’s only apparent piece of foreign policy was to reduce the power of the ‘United Nation’s [sic] controls’ over the country.¹⁵⁵ As a movement focussed on sovereignty—especially Māori tino rangatiratanga—foreign policy was significant for Vision New Zealand in 2020 only in so far as it allowed the party to safeguard its other political aims. Interestingly, since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, Destiny Church has become a visible supporter of Israel’s approach to the conflict.¹⁵⁶ In footage of its protest against calls for a ceasefire, we can observe a variety of Christian, Zionist, and political perspectives represented amongst the Destiny-led crowd. The distinctions between the priorities of Vision New Zealand and Destiny Church have become muddier in the years since the 2020 General Election, in large part

152 Paula Penfold and Louisa Cleave, ‘False Profit’, *Stuff*, accessed 10 February, 2021.

153 Te Kahika, ‘How the Nation of Israel was Formed’.

154 Israel Institute of New Zealand, ‘Videos’, Israel Institute of New Zealand (website), accessed 10 February, 2021.

155 Vision New Zealand, ‘Let’s Take New Zealand Back! 2020 Election Platform’, Vision New Zealand (website), accessed 10 February, 2021.

156 RNZ, ‘Pro-Israel Protest organised by Brian Tamaki outside Parliament’, *RNZ*, 7 December, 2023.

because of their centralisation around the Freedom & Rights Coalition.¹⁵⁷ With their former lack of interest in foreign policy, exactly why this issue has surged from total absence to the forefront of Destiny Church's political conversation is unclear. It seems likely that an ongoing trans-pacific influence of Christian Zionism in the United States' religious right forms a significant part of this emerging picture.

For One Party, the New Conservatives, and Advance New Zealand, the positioning of New Zealand in relation to Israel loomed large in their foreign policy agenda, whether deploying common civilisational and spiritual histories, Zionist appeals to the international far right, or abrasive, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. And yet, these policies were unlikely to ever be of consequence, either in international relations or as an electoral bargaining chip. These positions were adopted and publicised for reasons that seem to stand outside political transactionalism. Perhaps they were spiritual for One Party. Perhaps, for the New Conservatives, they expressed some connection to international movements of Christian Zionism. Perhaps, for Advance New Zealand, these ideas were accepted parts of imported conspiracy narratives. The unclear purpose behind these unusual policies makes their prominence for these parties all the more fascinating.

Conclusions

Though minor figures and without substantial electoral support, the wide-ranging policy objectives of these political parties highlight the analytical limitations of a left-right political model. While their foundations may have been in the classic battleground issues of social conservatism, their positioning on the 'Christian right' was increasingly destabilised by their policies in 2020. Only New Conservative could be easily identified with the 'Christian right' in a global sense, as a nationalist movement pursuing hard-neoliberal economics and social reforms aligned to religious conservatism. One Party, Advance New Zealand, and Vision New Zealand matched their moral conservatism with some radical policies for social, constitutional,

157 Freedom & Rights Coalition, 'NZ Stands with Israel', Facebook (video), 13 October, 2023.

and cultural transformation. One Party envisioned a bicultural Christian ‘Kingdom’ tackling homelessness, legislating co-governance between Māori and Pākehā, decriminalising drugs, and reforming mental health care. Advance New Zealand erupted out of its conspiratorial thinking to also call for free tertiary education and dental care, economic reform that focused on low-income earners, Māori-led restorative justice, and a vitalisation of Hapū sovereignty. Vision New Zealand’s proposal for an overhaul of our democracy to foreground Māori decision-making undermined their casting as ‘a conservative Christian fundamentalist party’ of ‘hard-right views’.¹⁵⁸

The conditions of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand are fertile for hybrid political theologies. While these political actors are propelled towards progressive ideals by reckonings with the settler-colonial state and its lived socio-economic realities, they also pursue novel forms of Christian nationalism and classic forms of moral conservatism. These three parties subvert facile political categorisations. But despite their complex policy offerings, they remain defined in the public eye by a handful of contentious issues of moral conscience.

With Aotearoa New Zealand’s distaste for overt religiosity, especially in proximity to political matters, Christian politicians face a challenge in expressing their aims.¹⁵⁹ One Party campaigned on a bold, intersectional agenda rooted in te ao Māori and Christianity that failed to translate into success at the ballot box and relegated them to total obscurity in the media. Vision New Zealand adopted policy borne out of their Christian background but stripped of obvious religious reference. Despite their efforts, this secular language did not enable Vision New Zealand to compete on the same turf as ‘non-religious’ minor parties. Where similarly peripheral groups received actual policy analysis from the media, Vision New Zealand, and leader Hannah Tamaki, were described only in their literal and figurative marriages to the ‘hard-right’ views of Destiny

158 Vision New Zealand, ‘Policy’.

159 Eric Kolig, “Coming Through the Backdoor?” Secularisation in New Zealand and Māori Religiosity’, in *The Future of Christianity*, 190.

Church.¹⁶⁰ Tamaki's voice, as a political, wahine Māori Christian, was belittled and vilified in ways that foregrounded her gender and religion over her policy.¹⁶¹ With a detailed, transformational vision for Māori, Tamaki's policies demanded incisive engagement and critique, and yet they weren't even acknowledged. Undermined by a current of white, misogynist bigotry, Tamaki was examined as nothing more than a caricature.

When not marginalised like the One Party or belittled like Vision New Zealand, local politicians engaging with religion do so with immense awkwardness. Former National Party leader Judith Collins' prayer at a Tāmaki church—with media team in tow—before casting her early vote in the 2020 Election is one such uncomfortable oddity. Collins' refusal to discuss her newly conspicuous Anglicanism was perhaps even more bizarre. Where Billy Te Kahika's invocations of Jesus, God, and the Bible enveloped his conspiracies in a quasi-prophetic aura, his refusal to discuss 'faith' with the media flew in the face of that public persona. While insisting that they are not a Christian party, the New Conservatives' conception of the nation as a product of 'Western democracy' and 'Judeo-Christian values' speaks to the manoeuvres through which religion may attempt to invoke an identity rather than push a policy objective.

Except for the New Conservatives, these groups were newly formed parties carving original paths through the politics of Aotearoa New Zealand in 2020. Just as Brubaker's theory of productive 'ambivalence' offers the opportunity to 'liberate the semantics of inequality from the semantics of difference' through refusing to assume that nationalism and populism always go hand-in-hand, learning to observe the compelling progressive policies of groups that also have complex far-right affiliations might offer new openings for the left.¹⁶² From pairings of anti-colonialism and social conservatism to tino rangatiratanga and xenophobic nationalism, these groups magnetise what might be seen as repellent political identities. These parties experiment with nationalism(s) and populism(s) that range

160 Vision New Zealand, 'Policy'.

161 RNZ, 'A Voice for the Silent Majority'.

162 Brubaker, 'Populism and Nationalism', 59.

from the productive to the nefarious. Whether deployed simultaneously (Vision New Zealand, Advance New Zealand, One Party) or with singular focus (New Conservatives), these appeals to tino rangatiratanga alongside a politics inflected by the international far right highlight the need to interrogate divergent conceptual networks. If the left is to develop a cogent alternative to far-right thinking, it must understand the anxieties from which it springs. The 2020 General Election was a critical point for observing the development of multifaceted brands of political activism. These movements redefined the small parties of the ‘religious right’ but they may have also influenced and anticipated conversations in the secular mainstream.