

Hermeneutics of Ecology and its Relationship to the Identity of the *Oikos* in Oceania



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General Introduction

The topic before us is as interesting as it is complex. It is my hope that you will be able to make some sense out of what I have to say on the topic. This paper is divided into five short sections. In the first section I will briefly outline the current state of ecological hermeneutics as a field of scholarly work, and the challenge for Oceania. In the second section I will point out a primary and vital connection between ecology and *oikos*. In the third section I will make the argument that for us in Oceania the *oikos* consists of the land and the sea and the atmosphere above, and will also point out the primary characteristics of this *oikos*. I will attempt to tease out what I understand by hermeneutics of ecology in section four, and will then make a connection to the identity of the *oikos* in the concluding section.

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1. Ecological Hermeneutics: Scholarly Trends and Challenge for Oceania

The article by Lynn White Jr in 1967 could perhaps be seen as one of the seminal works in the twentieth century, paving the way for scholarly discussions on the relationship between Christianity and the ecological crisis. In the article White asserts that the ecological crisis, especially in the (Western) Christian view of the world, has deep religious roots in the creation narratives and in the notion of humanity made in the image of God. This worldview, he argues, introduced a dualism between human beings and nature. This led to the notion that it was the will of God for human beings to exploit nature in the service of human interests, which, with the ever accelerating combination of science and technology, is now seemingly out of control. As such, 'Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt' (White 1967:5).¹ Because the ecological crisis has religious roots, White argues further, the cure must also be religious, which he finds in the thoughts and theology of St Francis of Assisi.² Many have responded to Lynn White's article, both in support of and against his arguments (see for example, Derr [?1975]).

Scholarly discussions on ecological hermeneutics have seen much progress since the appearance of White's article. Let me highlight two such developments. The first one is 'The Green Bible', which 'aims to equip and encourage people to see God's vision for our planet and help them engage in the work of healing and sustaining the environment'. 'The Green Bible' features scholarly reflections on the importance of the environment from leading and well known authors and church leaders. It is also critical of some traditional (Western) Christian ecotheologies that are highly anthropocentric, such as, for example, the perspective of humanity as stewards of creation. In a recent publication, the authors point out the position of 'The Green Bible', which is that, the stewardship perspective is not contained in the Bible *per se*, such as in Genesis chapter 1; rather, it is an attempt or a work of interpretation, 'not something in the Bible waiting to be discovered' (Horrell et al., 2010:6).

The second development is the 'Earth Bible Project', which has been concerned to read biblical texts 'from the perspective of Earth', that is, a reading of biblical texts in which Earth is the subject instead of just an object. The 'Earth Bible' initiative is critical of various ecotheologies claiming that the Bible is environmentally friendly; instead, it points out its



deeply anthropocentric worldview. The 'Earth Bible' builds on six ecojustice principles, namely:

- the principle of intrinsic worth
- the principle of interconnectedness
- the principle of voice
- the principle of purpose
- the principle of mutual custodianship
- the principle of resistance. (Habel & Trudinger, 2008:2):³

The firm position taken by the 'Earth Bible' is that 'a radical ecological hermeneutic requires a radical reorientation of the biblical text . . . [it] . . . demands a radical change of posture in relation to Earth as a subject in the text' (Habel & Trudinger 2008:3). In order to take these ecological principles further, the 'Earth Bible' advances the opinion that this 'radical ecological approach to the text involves a basic hermeneutic of suspicion, identification, and retrieval' (ibid.).

I would say that for Oceania a major challenge is the heavy dependence on and primary use of texts, in this case biblical texts, by (Western) Christian theology in hermeneutics, even in ecological hermeneutics. Two observations can be made as a result of this, which must be of significant ecological concern. The first is that the anthropocentric worldview in biblical texts continues to be preached, taught and advanced by all churches in the Oceania region. The second is that biblical texts that contain ecological and/or environmental references are only very occasionally used in preaching and are interpreted very much from an anthropocentric perspective. These do not reflect the worldview in many oral cultures in Oceania, where there existed, and still exists to an appreciable extent, a sense and experience of mutuality and interconnectedness between human beings and non-human beings; where nature and culture are seen not as separate and unrelated realms of reality but as dovetailing elements. Thus Pio Manoa's point can be appreciated when he says: 'I believe that the script and print culture misunderstood the oral culture in a number of significant ways . . .' (Manoa 2010).

I advance the view that in the primarily oral cultures of Oceania, where daily life experience is based on the interrelatedness of the land, sea and atmosphere, ecological hermeneutics must give serious consideration to sources of a 'non-textual' nature. The transition from textual to non-



textual source is not unknown and was first advanced by Paul Ricoeur, in particular to the unwritten source of *activity*, and the *narrativity* of such sources. Ricoeur ‘expands the concept of text by showing how meaningful human activity can be seen as a text, how such activity can have the same “readability characteristics” as a text’ (Tongeren 1994:57). A connection could be made here between Ricoeur’s expansion of what is textual with Schreier’s method of constructing contextual theologies based on ‘culture texts’, which are sets of interlocking signs linked with actions and activities (Schreier 1985:67ff.). [I will therefore add here that semiotics must be seen as an integral aspect of ecological hermeneutics in Oceania.] More specifically, Ricoeur’s ‘meaningful human activity’ and narrativity of non-textual sources, and Schreier’s ‘culture texts’ such as different types of ‘communal celebrations’, ‘rites of passage’, ‘healing rituals’ and ‘art’ do complement each other. If the term ‘non-textual source’ were taken further, anything in the world could be read as a text; however, it must be borne in mind that not all texts are equally legible. The landscape and seascape in Oceania are not empty spaces; rather, they are simultaneously repositories and mediators of tradition and history that are impregnated with meaning and significance reaching back into both the mythic and the historical past. I hold to the position that a non-textual approach to ecological hermeneutics in Oceania should, therefore, advance the concept of the legibility of the landscape and seascape and the corresponding ‘airscape’, and the activities expended on them.⁴ This is the approach that I will take in this paper, hoping it will become clearer in the course of my presentation. Of course, we will need to be constantly conscious of the increasing difficulty in reading such non-textual sources because of the rapid multi-faceted changes that have a negative impact on their legibility.

2. Ecology and *Oikos*: making the vital connection

The words ecology, economics and ecumenicity all have their roots in the word *Oikos* (de Gruchy n.d.; see also McFague 2008:48–59). However, because the focus of this paper is on ecology and how it relates to the *Oikos*, I will not go into economics and ecumenicity. The term ‘ecology’ consists of two Greek words, *oikos-logos*, where the first term, *oikos*, means ‘home’ or ‘household’ and the second term, *logos*, means ‘word’ but can also mean ‘study’. Putting together these two words, *oikos-logos* means the study of the home or household; it is the study of the way things relate to



make the home or household work.⁵ McFague puts this even more simply when she says that ‘Ecology is, at its simplest, “words about home”: *oikos* (home) and *logos* (word)’ (McFague 2008:48). For most people the home metaphor is associated with a sense of belonging, sense of care and the feeling of being ‘at home’. Ecology is about planet Earth—‘its nature and rules, and hence where we fit into it’ (ibid.:49) not about how we can shape and pummel the Earth into our own liking. The metaphor of home brings to mind also ‘rules’ that are necessary for its functioning. McFague highlights three home rules that are just as relevant to a family home as to the Earth as a whole: ‘(1) Take only your share. (2) Clean up after yourself. (3) Keep the house in good repair for others’ (ibid.:51). When taken seriously, the home metaphor is filled with potential as well as practicalities that could transform how humanity lives, walks and works on the Earth.

3. *Oikos* in Oceania and Its Characteristics

While the concept of *oikos* could well be used in an increasing scale of reference, that is, from a small locality to the entire Earth, my use of it here is within the context of Oceania as a whole. In this case the *oikos* consists of all the islands that dot the Ocean, and the reefs, lagoons and seas that surround the islands. In pan-Oceania parlance the land and sea, or *vanua* and *moana*, embody the terrestrial and marine/coastal ecosystems. This is rooted in the Oceania-wide understanding that ‘it [*vanua* or land] encompasses many things and includes earthly turf, flora and fauna of a given place, rivers and mountains, fishing ground . . . and more’ (Tuwere 2002:33).⁶ and that ‘it [land] is a heavily loaded term and combines together economics, politics, history, sociology, ethnicity, tradition, identity and spirituality’ (Tuwere 2000). In other words, it is nature as we know it in context. Land and sea are the *oikos* of Oceania within which life and wellbeing of the majority of the people are shared, sustained and furthered. The fact of land as communal *oikos* for most people in Oceania is highlighted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat:

At the simplest level, land derives its centrality from its communal role as the source of livelihood and way of life through subsistence activities. Land provides family and communal living space. Land is a source of food, medicinal items, firewood, cooking utensils, building materials, clothing, tools, weapons and decorations. Even as traditional societies join the cash economy land continues to be used for these purposes, although in some cases goods may be sold or exchanged rather than used by the community. This traditional role of land is equivalent to it acting as a source of employment and resources and a store of wealth. (2001)⁷

Oikos in the context of Oceania is particular in three main ways, and for the purpose of ecological hermeneutics it is important that these are understood. The first particularity of Oceania is that it is a ‘sea of islands’ (to use the descriptive phrase as given prominence by Hau‘ofa 1993) or ‘tiny specks of land scattered across a vast ocean’ (Lobban & Schefter 1997:17). It is estimated that less than two per cent of the combined land–sea area is land. As such, it is the ‘island ecosystem’⁸ that predominates and this makes the islands vulnerable to climate change. This particularity insists that **human beings are inextricably connected to the maritime ecosystem**. The second particularity is the prevalence of the traditional or subsistence economy, which comprises both the land and coastal waters, reefs and fishing grounds. Fairbairn and Worrell (1996:77) point out that ‘(s)ubsistence production remains a major feature of the economic life of most Pacific islands’;⁹ it is resilient and has sustained ‘living standards when (as happens periodically) the monetary sector has contracted’ (ibid.).¹⁰ This particularity insists that **people are connected to the terrestrial ecosystem**. The third particularity is the communal sense attached to the land. Communities, not individuals, belong to the land and communities, not individuals, ‘own’ the land together. This particularity insists that **people are connected to one another**. These particularities—interconnectedness to the sea, the land and one another, and included in all this *oikos* is the atmosphere—are vital for an ecological hermeneutic in Oceania. This captures the spirit of what Solomone (2005) says:



We are more aware than those in bigger countries of what nature means to us. It is our source of livelihood and as well it is our death. The land, sea, and air are those vital elements to which we belong intimately as people, as a community and as a country . . . Land and sea and air are intimately connected as one whole. Without one or the other there is no life. Without one or the other we the little peoples of Oceania will vanish from the face of the earth . . .

4. Oceanian Ecological Hermeneutics: land-sea-air-scape as texts

Let me now share with you what I understand and advance as ecological hermeneutics both in and for Oceania. If hermeneutics is the art or science of interpreting texts as well as non-texts in search of meaning, then ecological hermeneutics in Oceania traditionally and historically has been, and continues to be, connected to and based upon the land, sea and air and the interactions between human beings and these components of their *oikos*. For Oceanians, the landscape, seascape, 'airscape' and human activities are, indeed always have been, texts to be read and interpreted. They are filled with narratives and meanings that are 'open' to one who seeks to understand and who is at the same time open to meanings that such texts evoke. Encompassing all of this is the worldview in which the divine is present and involved in and through the rhythms and workings of the *oikos*; thus, such reading leads to interpretations that are, more often than otherwise, religiously-oriented. Morality and spirituality are, therefore, also intimately connected to the way people interact in and with the components of their *oikos*, or with nature.

From times past up to the present, people of Oceania have read the landscape and seascape and atmosphere. Saying the obvious, those who till the land for a living know the best times of the year to plant and/or harvest certain types of root crops, fruit trees and so on; and those who fish for a living know the spawning periods of different species of fish, and the appropriate times to collect different types of shellfish. These rhythms and processes of the land and the sea are connected to the rhythms of atmosphere through the different moon phases, which are also linked with movement of currents and tide, and different fish species in a



yearly cycle. The ability to read the landscape and seascape and the rhythms and cycles in which they move is vital. These rhythms are inclusive of the wet and dry seasons and associated winds. On this basis, it can be said that ecological hermeneutics in Oceania derives from and builds on the interconnectedness between the people and their *oikos*.

In Oceania, the landscape and the seascape are inscribed with narratives and stories. Mountains, valleys, caves, forest and bush areas, sacred spots, rivers, reefs and islets, these are not just empty spaces but are places in which stories are embedded; they are not vacuums waiting to be filled with some matter or substance but are storied repositories. Reading the land-sea-scape as text means that we read these places that are filled with meanings in order for interpretation to come about. The landscape and seascape contain narratives and stories of death and life, hatred and love, enmity and friendship, warfare and peace, sorrow and joy, greed and generosity, plenty and want, deception and sincerity, and despair and hope.

Traditionally, peoples of Oceania read terrestrial and maritime 'signs' and 'signs' from the 'airscape', either on their own or in association with other 'signs', for the pursuit of meaningful and 'good' life. In my culture we have the concept of *tiro* (literally 'read') or *ome* (literally 'see' or 'discern'). This concept is applied to the weather (reading the sky to determine what the weather is likely to be); the land, which is inclusive of such features as the earthly turf, flora, fauna and rivers (for instance reading the forest to see if it is suitable for certain human activities such as cultivating a food garden); and the sea (for instance reading the sea to see if it will be rough or otherwise). *Tiro* or *ome* are applied also to specific activities, and the following two examples connected to reading (from) the sea illustrate this: first, *tiro vovoto vonu* means to read a turtle's egg in order to know when and where the turtle will next go up the beach to lay eggs; *tiro qae* means to read the reef flat in order to track and catch an octopus. From this it could be said that ecological hermeneutics in Oceania is rooted not only in the reader's desire to read and interpret the textuality of the land-sea-air-scape, but more-so on its legibility or readability.

Looking at the foregoing from another angle, the land-sea-air-scape speaks with a voice that calls for attentive listening and active hearing. Place-names are an integral part of the voice of the land and sea, and these place-names are filled with place-meanings. What does the name of a mountain, a sacred spot, a cave or a rock say to a keen and attentive listener? The name of the third highest mountain on the island of Vangunu where I come from in the Western Province of Solomon Islands



is Bareke. This place name is the name of the tribe of which I am a part; it is the name of my mother tongue (Bareke language); it is the original home of my maternal ancestors; and according to tradition it is the site of the throne or seat of the human–divine figure to whom the Bareke people trace their origin. The voice of this mountain is still being heard today. Communal celebrations through feasting, dancing, singing and chanting are also an integral part of the voice of the land. So too are times of mourning and loss. In my traditional culture, major celebrations such as weddings or occasions of barter are made to coincide with major harvest times on the land and low tides and fish spawning seasons in the sea. The land-sea-air-scape speaks with one voice. From this it could be said that an important aspect of ecological hermeneutics in Oceania is the voice of the land-sea-air-scape. Listening to and hearing this voice is a challenge that grows with the passing of time and changes in lifestyle.

In Oceania, the identity of a person is formed not in isolation or apart from community, but in association with and involvement in it, as well as in interacting with his/her environment. Likewise, community identity and formation is also partly the outcome of its interaction with its environment. Thus the human community not only is connected within itself but is also intimately interconnected to the totality of the land-sea-air-scape community. Communal celebrations through feasting, dancing, singing and chanting, and even mourning are an integral part of reaffirming communal identity. Moreover, these communal celebratory activities when read as texts and heard as voices reveal the reality that community, communal identity and relationships transcend human relationships and include relationships with the land-sea-air-scape. It could be argued therefore, that human identity in much of present-day Oceania is inconceivable apart from its intimate interconnectedness with the landscape, seascape and ‘airscape’. From this it could be said that an important aspect of ecological hermeneutics in Oceania is the embeddedness and interconnectedness of communal identity within the wider land-sea-air-scape or the *oikos* in Oceania.

All of the foregoing discussion highlights a crucial element: the centrality and paramountcy of **care** as an integral part of Oceania ecological hermeneutics. As Solomone rightly says, ‘Care for creation, nurture it for if it becomes less than healthy, we are the first ones to sink with it. Other landed peoples can move elsewhere, we cannot. Other landed people may find means of surviving on sea, we have not found a



technology or the skill to cope with such a possibility' (Solomone 2005). More and more, people's livelihood is threatened thanks to the increasing illegibility of the land-sea-air-scape, due chiefly to climate change and global warming—and the sea-level rise thus induced, the difficulty-of-predicting weather and the increasingly chaotic weather patterns, and the woes and ills of global capitalism, especially through the indiscriminate exploitation of terrestrial and maritime resources, and through its heavy and runaway industrialisation of Earth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me highlight the main points of this paper.

First, I make the clarification that ecology is the English transliteration of *oikos-logos*, (eco-logy) which is rooted in the Greek concept of *oikos* meaning 'home' or 'household'. Ecology therefore means words about home, and rules—house rules—that are meant to make the home work. I point out that when taken seriously, this concept of home has the potential and practicality to transform how we live in our part of the Earth.

Second, in the case of Oceania *oikos* is inclusive of the landscape, seascape and 'airscape' in which human beings also have their place as members and participants in the rhythms and processes of the home. Ecology is, therefore, about the land and sea and air and the 'house rules' that must be observed to make this home (continue to) work. The livelihood of people in Oceania is intimately interconnected to the *oikos*. I argue that the characteristic of the *oikos* in Oceania is particularistic, in three ways:

- a) it is a 'sea of islands', or as some call it, the 'liquid continent' where less than 2 per cent is land. Sea-level rise induced by climate change accompanying global warming poses life and death scenarios for most island communities
- b) by far still the greater majority of each country's total population continues to live in the subsistence or traditional sector, which comprise both the land and the sea, especially the coastal reefs, lagoons and fishing grounds. Rapid penetration and 'consumerisation' of the rural populations by globalising



economic forces are a real threat to the resilience of this heart-beat of Oceanian life and livelihood

- c) not less than 90% of the total land area of each country is under customary tenure and land is held by communities not individuals. The push in various countries toward privatisation of customary land for purposes of attracting foreign investments for economic-commercial development drives a wedge into the heart of communal 'ownership' of the land.

All these particularities are important bases for ecological hermeneutics in Oceania.

Third, hermeneutics traditionally has to do with interpretation of written texts in the search for meaning; in the case of Oceania, however, where culture is still primarily oral, hermeneutics has to deal with texts other than those written. The theoretical framework for this approach has been established by Paul Ricoeur in the following ways:

- a) expansion of the concept of text to include meaningful human activities, since these can have the same 'readability characteristics' as a written text
- b) recognition of the concept of *narrativity* of unwritten texts.

Taking these two perspectives together with Schreiter's insightful discussion (1985) on 'culture texts', I argue in this paper that the landscape, seascape and 'airscape' of Oceania are texts from which ecological hermeneutics derive and upon which this hermeneutics is built.

Lastly but not least, and taking all the above points into consideration, I identify in this paper the following principles of ecological hermeneutics that recognise, uphold and advance the identity of the *oikos* in Oceania.

Principle of interconnectedness. Ecological hermeneutics in Oceania derives from and builds on the interconnectedness between the people and their *oikos*, and between all members of the *oikos*.

Principle of readability. Ecological hermeneutics in Oceania is rooted not only in the reader's desire to read

and interpret the textuality of the land-sea-air-scape but more so in its legibility or readability.

Principle of celebration and sharing. Ecological hermeneutics in Oceania sustains and builds community and communal identity and vitality through appropriate human activities.

Principle of voice. Ecological hermeneutics in Oceania cares to hear the voice of the land-sea-air-scape, including its mournful voice because of human-induced pain.

Principle of identity. Ecological hermeneutics in Oceania reflects and propagates the embeddedness and interconnectedness of communal identity within the wider land-sea-air-scape or the *oikos* in Oceania.

Principle of care. The centrality and paramountcy of care is an integral part of Oceanian ecological hermeneutics.

All six principles are, in one way or another, connected to the primacy of life in Oceania, where human life is not only connected to but also dependent upon non-human life. From a Christian perspective all life finds its fullness and fulfilment both in the land-sea-air-scape concreteness and in the ‘meta-life’ of Jesus the Son of God.

Notes

1 The version of the paper referenced in this paper is available online at <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>.

2 See, for instance, St Francis of Assisi’s ‘Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon’ at <http://www.yenra.com/catholic/prayers/francisofassisi.html>.

3 In ‘Earth Bible’ usage, ‘Earth’ refers to ‘the total ecosystem that is the web of life—the domain of nature with which we are familiar, of which we are an integral part, and in which we face the future’ (Habel & Trudinger 2008:3). As will be clear in section four of this paper, there are resonances between these principles and what I will present as principles of ecological hermeneutics in Oceania.



4 The concept of the legibility of the landscape has been discussed in some latest academic research and publication. See, for instance, Drenthen, Keulartz & Proctor (2009).

5 In his own words, de Gruchy says (n.d.:2): ‘Our English word economy is made up of two Greek words, *oikos* – *nomos*, meaning the rules of the home or the rule of the household . . . Our English word ecology is made up of the Greek words, *oikos* – *logos*, meaning the study of the home or household, the study of the way things relate and are integrated to make the home work’.

6 The term *vanua* is Fijian but the concept of land and its significance are transpacific as evidenced in the similarity of the various words used for land throughout the region: *vanua* in Fiji, *fenua* in Maohi, *fenua* in Samoa, *fonua* in Tonga, *whenua* in Maori, *banua*, *pangua* and *aubenua* in parts of Melanesia, etc.

7 It is to be noted that terms such as ‘source of employment’, ‘resources’ and ‘store of wealth’ used by the Forum Secretariat are neither neutral nor value-free but are the economisation of land, which reflect the ways in which land is becoming commoditised.

8 http://www.sprep.org/programme/island_eco.htm. Cited 01/12/2009. One of the two programmes run by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, SPREP, is ‘Island Ecosystems’.

9 Fairbairn and Worrell point out that ‘In Kiribati, Vanuatu and Western Samoa, as much as 60–80 per cent of the total population is involved in a major way in subsistence activities’ (1996:77). This also holds true for most other PICs and could still be as high as 85 per cent as in the case of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. The only other region that is similar to Oceania in this regard is the Caribbean but as also pointed out by Fairbairn and Worrell, ‘... in the Caribbean, except for a few isolated areas, it [subsistence production] has virtually disappeared under the onslaught of the modern commercial economy’ (ibid.).

10 Fairbairn and Worrell cited the case of Samoa as an example from the late 1980s. The case of Solomon Islands during the period of ethnic tension, 2000–2003, is a recent example that shows the resilience of the subsistence economy in supporting the livelihood and welfare of people when the cash economy contracted.



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