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Eco-theological Responses to Climate Change in Oceania*

Cecilie Rubow
Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
cecilie.rubow@anthro.ku.dk

Cliff Bird
Pacific Theological College, Suva, Fiji
cliff.bird@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores eco-theological responses to climate change in Oceania. First, we review central texts in the contextual theological tradition in Oceania, focusing on recent responses to climate change. This points to a body of theological texts integrating climate change into a broader effort to reform classical theologies and church practices. Secondly, we identify challenges facing the contextual theologies, among them recent claims about climate-change-denying responses by Biblicist Christians in the Pacific region. These challenges apart, we suggest, thirdly, that the churches are important actors in the cultural modeling of climate change. We highlight the uniqueness of Christian narratives from the Pacific region, while alluding to the fact that literal interpretations of scriptures are influential in many other parts of the world too.

Keywords

climate change – contextual theology – eco-theology – Oceania

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1 Climate Change in a Liquid Continent: Time and Place

In a time of global warming, when scanning the horizon for useful social technologies, religion is identified as one of the potentially important cultural forces (Donner 2007; Nunn 2009, 2010; Bergmann 2009; Skrimshire 2010). The reasoning goes like this: if religion is an expression of what is of significance in people's lives and models deep-seated motivations and norms, then religion could be a forceful actor in adaptation processes. The idea that religion necessarily implies a respectful relationship to "the creation" or "Mother Earth" should nevertheless not be taken for granted (Gerten and Bergmann 2011). Religious beliefs and practices may certainly, in some ways, shape certain protective values, attitudes, and politics concerning the environment, but it cannot be overlooked that religions are also heterogeneous and may thus comprise theologies and traditions that ignore or distance themselves from environmental issues. As Mike Hulme has argued, it is more durable to claim that religion divides as much as it unites: "One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is because we believe different things about our duty to others, to Nature and to our deities" (2009: 144). Thus, to appoint religion as a serviceable social technique is to overlook how climate change and religion as multifaceted phenomena merge in conflicting ways.

Globally, and in Oceania, the notion of anthropogenic climate change has gained authority and credibility through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[1] and a large number of environmental NGOs. Climate change is now discussed across many societal sectors and climate change discourse seeps into scholarly and vernacular theologies too. In the media, in environmental workshops, policy papers, scientific journals, and in the eco-theological tradition, projections warn that the "liquid continent" of Oceania will enter an entirely new order of things. Climate change is characterized by concepts such as "an accelerated sea level rise" and "more high-intensity cyclones," and scientists urge politicians and the wider population to act in order to avoid long-term changes. New futures and new spatial orders are carved out by both sciences and religions.

In this article we analyze how the Pacific anticipations of a new *spatial* order of the land, the sea, and the sky emerge in the eco-theological tradition. By highlighting central notions in the contextual theological field in Oceania, we

1 Referring to IPCC Fourth Assessment, Nunn (2010) summarizes the threat in the Pacific area to be a) temperature rise, at least 2.5°C higher in 2100 compared to 1990, but perhaps even more; b) sea level rise, in IPCC projected to a maximum of 58 cm; and c) more storminess (2010: 235).

show how climate change epitomizes an interconnectedness between culture and nature by thinking across land, sea, sky and people. The arrival of climate change in the Pacific as a scientific anticipation of a new spatial disorder (such as "inundated shores" and "sinking islands"), we propose, is supplemented by a no less significant new framing of *time*. The scientific notion of climate change only makes sense in the context of a long-term perspective based on measurements going to back to previous ice ages and climate models projecting the past and the present into the distant future. At the same time, Oceanian people obviously live on the shoreline in consecutive moments of the present with climate change entering the local history along with a plethora of other chronotypes (Fabian 1991), that is, various conceptions of time grounded in both traditional and religious worldviews.

In the eco-theological literature climate change is introduced in the late 1990s by inserting a characteristic sense of urgency. Just as logging and atomic testing have their condensed moments of urgency, the qualitative change implied in concepts such as "accelerated sea level rise," "tipping points," and "negative feedback mechanisms" appears to produce a particular distribution of time. Janet Guyer's notion of the "evacuation of the near future" (2007), denoting situations with a conspicuous absence of realistic planning and confidence in stable—or even better—"near futures", expresses well the gap between the scientifically installed long-term perspective and instances of "enforced presentism", represented by scholars, NGO's, and others arguing that actions of mitigation and adaptation should be taken immediately. It is our contention that both policies and theologies in the Pacific region are now struggling to fill out this gap between urgent presentisms and the long-term scenario of new places—sinking islands, rising floods and migrating populations—by rearticulating plans and hopes for secure places to live in the near future. Religions are extremely effective time-machines with a multiplicity of chronotypes (existential now's, near-expectations, distant futures, and eternities), and the christianities of Oceania are acutely localized practices, which are, nonetheless, globally entangled. For these reasons, the churches are, we suspect, potentially important—and conflicting—actors in the cultural modeling of new time/place configurations of climatic changes.

Our investigation of the time/place calibrations of eco-theologies and conventional theologies is thus organized along the following lines: First, from a historical perspective, we outline the tradition of contextual theologies in the Pacific region[2] with a focus on the core concepts of place (*vanua*: "land", and

2 Taking into consideration the size and cultural diversity of the Oceanian region, the multi-

moana: "sea") and time (especially notions of "waiting"). Secondly, we identify and discuss emerging theological tensions concerning the time/place configurations of climate change and the Noahic covenant. Finally, we look into newer eco-theological contributions from the Pacific and the efforts to bridge tensions between an apparent vernacular fatalism, various indigenous traditions, and new climate eco-theologies.

2 Oceanic Contextual Theology and the Emerging Eco-theologies

Contextual theology in Oceania draws on traditional natural-cultural worldviews and practices, which include notions of interconnectedness, belonging, sharing and reciprocity, respect, and the sacredness of the land-sea-air domain. It is apparent that the changes in theological thinking reflect not only the growing confidence and ability of Oceanian theologians to develop and articulate contextual theologies, but also of the imperative for contextual theologies to keep abreast of new and emerging issues that have direct bearing on Oceanian peoples, such as economic globalization and climate change. Eco-theologies therefore represent a new trajectory in the felt need to address issues of concern from the particular perspectives of Oceanian peoples.

During the period before the ascendency of discourses on climate change in Oceania, contextual theology was primarily about cultural integrity and identity. Amanaki Havea's "coconut theology" (1986), which was an attempt at articulating a "Pacific Christ", was among the earliest attempts at contextualizing theology. Havea's theology stressed the central importance and functions of the coconut for the lives and well-being of Oceanian people. As such, for Havea the coconut could be used as a symbol for Christ. An important aspect of Havea's theology is his coinage of "(c)oconut time" (ibid.: 14) to describe an Oceanic understanding of time as *waiting* and *nature's own time*. This resonates with Sevati Tuwere's conception of time in his *vanua* (land) theology as a place in which one waits (1992, 2002). We suggest that time as *waiting*, in

plicity of locations and christianities, we do not claim to cover the innumerable interfaces between theology, society and climate change. Our survey of relevant written sources indicates that theological treatment of the issue of climate change is a late development. The theological literature on the issue is still quite limited and patchy (see also Peter Rudiak-Gould's research in the Marshall Islands, 2011). We draw on work done by Barker (1989), Trompf (1995), and Ernst (2006) on the history and variations of Oceanic christianities, and on the contributions of Estermann (2003), Forman (2005), Paunga (2009) and most recently Gibbs (2010) on Oceanic contextual theology.

the sense of people living within the fecundity and powers of nature, may be seen as a contribution to filling the void between "enforced presentism" and the good portion of "fantasy futurism" integral to discourses on climate change. This time-place connection to fecundity and the powers of nature signifies the holistic understanding of the pan-Oceanian concept of *mana* (Bird 2008) as both process (Keesing 1985; Firth 1970; Hviding 1996) and supernatural power (Codrington 1891; Tippett 1967; Tuwere 2002).

Perhaps more significantly, this period was marked by the development of contextual theologies by theologians like Leslie Boseto (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995), Sevati Tuwere (1992, developed further in 2002), and Jovili Meo (1996). Boseto highlights a traditional worldview where "[o]ur whole life's existence and survival depends on the interrelatedness, interdependence, and interrelationship of the whole of life" (1992: 81). This interconnectedness is, for Boseto, revelatory of God's presence and grace. Thus for him "incarnation means to contextualize" (ibid.: 83). Addressing the onslaught and impacts of transnational corporations, particularly in the form of foreign commercial logging and mining companies, Boseto (1994) appeals to the presence of God and God's spirit in the land, sea, and sky in an effort to forge a theology of the environment that stems from the people's perspectives and experiences. He speaks of God's loving act of creating the Earth as the basis for the people's love for the Earth, and as such their suffering is also the Earth's suffering.

This trend of theological thinking is shared by other Oceanian theologians: John Havea (1993) argues that a common ground of "Pacificness" and "Christianness" in any Pacific theology is their "life-centeredness"—a theme captured by Phillip Gibbs's (2010) description of the "primacy of life" as characteristic of a unique Pacific contribution to global theological reflection in an age of climate change. Jovili Meo (1996) speaks of what he call "gems" of Pacific communities in terms of traditional values: inclusiveness, reconciliation, unity, participation, dialogue, partnership, fellowship, sharing, and service are the hallmarks of communal living (ibid.: 85), which he links to the kingdom of God. Sevati Tuwere's (1992, 2002) theology of *vanua* (land) highlights the central significance of land for Fijians, in both the literal and the symbolic sense, which cannot be separated. Land is the primary source of life, means of livelihood, and root of identity, and is intimately linked to the traditional meaning and sense of time, which is connected to the rhythms and processes of *tvanua*. Tuwere's theology is particularly significant for the climate change discourse in that he outlines the *vanua* conception of time in terms of *waiting* in connection with the rhythms of the land: "Time … is not so much something to be used as it is a *place* in which one waits—for the birthing of the fish, for the flowering of the *drala* tree [the *erythrina variegate* tree] or the appearing of the *balolo* [an edi-

ble sea-worm, *annelid Euniceviridis*] on the reefs" (2002: 39)—a conception of time and place distinctly different from the time/place configuration of climate change and its perceived impacts.

Ama'amalele Tofaeono's *Eco-Theology: AIGA* (2000) is the first major work on eco-theology in Oceania. Writing against the backdrop of the global ecological crisis (manifest as global warming, climate change, and sea-level rise, and the threats and effects of nuclear tests, and seen in the context of the ecological dangers inherent in the superimposed Western model of economic development, which depends on the extraction and commoditization of maritime, terrestrial, and geological resources), Tofaeono contends that the problem is eco-theological to its roots. By this he means that the teachings of Oceanian christianities are detached from the traditional doctrines and moorings of the indigenous religions of Oceania. This contention is made by Tofaeono on the basis of the fact that Oceanian indigenous religions are rich repositories for contextual eco-theology. The *Aiga*, or household community, is integrally connected with the gods and ancestors as well as with the land, sea, and sky—a theme and perspective that is shared also by Bird (2008, 2009) and Solomone (2005) in the context of the Solomon Islands. Tofaeono seeks both pastoral-prophetic and ecological commitment to addressing the challenges of ecological crisis including climate change: the integration of religio-cultural-natural knowledge into Christian doctrine and praxis; re-articulation of offering as an act of appreciation and willingness to share values and practices, and the integration of the traditional calendar (*Aiga's* seasons and rhythms) into the Christian Year Calendar—a theme taken further by Tuwere (see his The Land is Now Dancing, 2009) in the Fijian context. As we will show in the final section, the themes of sharing and interconnectedness of the land, sea, and sky are also a characteristic feature of Winston Halapua's (2008, 2010) *theomoana*, or "God the Ocean" theology.

Since 2001 and onwards, notions of global warming and climate change and their perceived impacts on low-lying atoll countries have made a historic appearance in ecumenical conferences and consultations.[3] The Nadi 2001 declaration is explicitly linked to land-sea-people relationships: "The land, the sea and people are integral parts of one entity. Subsistence farming, a sustainable agriculture and the sensitivity of the sacredness of the trees and the sea are part

3 Ecumenical theological consultations organized by the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), and some jointly organized by the PCC and the Pacific Theological College (PTC), as well as one jointly organized by the PCC, PTC, and the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS), include climate change and its perceived impacts as a major issue of concern amongst other issues.

of their identity."*The Otin Taai* Declaration (2004) makes explicit a hermeneutical connection between Biblical teaching and traditional Pacific teaching, which is then used as the basis for encouraging human beings to exercise good stewardship by living respectfully, humbly, caringly, and reciprocally on/with the Earth. This belief is coupled with the urgent presentism of climate change and its perceived impacts—rising sea levels, increasingly high tides and storm surges endangering homes, shorelines eroding, coral bleaching, the salinization of arable land and underground water tables, chaotic weather patterns, and so on. It particularly urges "Churches (pastors) [to] equip themselves with an eco-theology to fully understand the relationship of God, nature and the people," and the PCC [Pacific Conference of Churches] to "produce, provide, and share theological resources that focus on prayer and reflection related to climate change through consultations and workshops."

The central focus of the Nadi 2009 symposium, the topic of resettlement and the outcome of the meeting was the *Moana* Declaration, a call to the states belonging to the Pacific Islands Forum and the international community to ensure that those forced to flee their homes and lands be treated with dignity and respect, and that their human rights be protected and enforced. The declaration was made on the basis of climate change impacts on "food and water security; our way of life; our culture; our community; our overall health and well being; the ecological systems on which we depend; other creatures with whom we share God's creation". It ends with a reaffirmation of the church's prophetic role and responsibility "to recognize and speak out against the injustices wrought on by climate change."

Although the declarations speak of a clear concern across many congregations and nations, the question is what developments, if any, have emerged from the declarations and outcomes.[4] Seen from the perspective of the organizers, implementation of the declarations in the member churches is moving rather slowly and proving difficult, and various challenges are held responsible for this situation, from theological to financial. Some churches, such as the Ekalesia Kerisiano Niue (EKN), say that they are not willing to accept climate change-forced resettlement because of the belief that Niue is God's gift to its people. Churches such as the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (EKT) are also often reported to feel a tension between climate change and the Noahic covenant, a challenge that we address more fully in the section below. Churches in the larger countries tend not to pay serious attention or give high priority

4 The following is based on discussions with the PCC's Climate Change and Resettlement Animator, conducted by Cliff Bird with Peter Emberson in May 2011.

to climate change because they perceive it as a less immediate risk to their members. Some churches stress their limited capacity in terms of technical and professional knowledge to meaningfully address climate change, while other churches point to financial constraints. At the same time, some things have started to change: officers dealing with climate change in the EKT and Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC), for instance, tell of educational awareness programs—both biblical-theological and others—that they are working on in their churches.[5] The United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI) has engaged in talks about climate change both amongst the clergy and in some rural church communities;[6] again, a question that was consistently raised during the awareness talks concerned the tension between Noahic covenant and climate change. We will now turn to what we term "the Noah controversy", exposing tensions of the time/place configurations, not only affecting the theological field itself, but also the larger community engaged in climate change.

3 The Question of Denial: Frictions between Multiple Time/Place Configurations

> [P]eople believe in God and that this place will be safe.
> This is our belief[7]

Around the world, coral atolls, especially in the Carteret Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Tuvalu, have become paradigmatic examples of the perhaps fatal topological and societal change produced by climate change. In both scientific projections and the public imagination, shorelines and small islands presently seen to be eroding are projected to disappear. In the more distant future the rising sea may engulf entire island populations and whole states. This scenario, in which a distant future is already encroaching onto the shores of these islands and their inhabitants, is depicted in several ways: a) dramatic footage of king tides, eroded sea walls, and falling trees seen in the world's medias; b) awareness campaigns for innumerable environmental projects financed by external donors targeting climate change; c) a wide body of academic literature addressing the question of how climate change science can link up with society

5 Personal communication between the two officers and Cliff Bird.

6 One of the two authors, Cliff Bird, was involved in several such awareness talks on climate change in the context of official church meetings (Synod and General Assembly) and village communities.

7 Tuvaluan woman quoted in Mortreux and Barnett (2009: 110).

and politics; and d) an even faster growing body of climate change vulnerability and adaptation assessments with an authorship that includes school children, community leaders, scientific experts, and a varied group of consultants. In this body of texts, crossing many genres, we will now identity and follow a single strand, the Noah controversy, which epitomizes one of the most pertinent time/place tensions in the local relationship between religion and climate change.

The abovementioned *Otin Taai* (Sunrise) Declaration with the subtitle, *Statement and Recommendations from the World Council of Churches in the Pacific and WCC Member Churches in the Pacific 6–11 March 2004, Tarawa, Kiribati*, is an often quoted document, even in the arena of world politics, for example in UN contexts such as the Conferences of the Parties (COP's). In this quite dense document, climate change is forcefully placed at the head of churches' concern. It opens with characteristic urgent presentism, stating that "Here on the small atoll islands of Kiribati, the impacts of human-induced climate change are already visible. The sea level is rising. People's homes are vulnerable to the increasingly high tides and storm surges." Thereafter, a number of statements pinpoint the commitments and the responsibilities of Christians, locally, and of "Christian sisters and brothers" throughout the world. For example, the first statement reads that the participants "feel called to God to affirm our commitment to care for the earth as our response to God's love for creation." In a section titled "What We Believe," highlighting connections between the biblical understanding of the "wholeness and inter-relatedness of all creation" and Pacific teachings about the land and the ocean, a call is made to be "good stewards or custodians." Immediately afterwards, a noteworthy disclaimer is added:

> We would like to say a word about God's promise to Noah not to flood the earth again. Some Christians view this covenant as a guarantee that they are not at risk of flooding from climate change. But the sea level is rising and threatening Pacific Islands with flooding from high tides and storm surges. This is not an act of God. It is a result of human economic and consumer activities that pollute the atmosphere and lead to climate change. Most of these polluting emissions come from highly-industrialized countries. Our response to God's covenant should be to act in love toward God's creation and to reduce the pollution that is contributing to climate change. By placing us on the earth God has given us both the right to use it and the responsibility to do so with care.

The important role the Old Testament plays in Oceanian Christianities has been well described (Ernst 2006). Now, in times of a rising sea level, the story about Noah and the Flood is coming to the fore anew: if the world is flooding, what happens to God's promise to Noah? This question is reportedly often asked of church leaders, and other experts, when they work on "raising awareness" on climate change in island communities.[8] Journalists, NGOs, social scientists, and philosophically minded natural scientists have also come across the Oceanian topicality of the story of Noah, in many other Christian teachings "marginalized as a nice story for children" (Cobb 2001: 216). Characteristically, Simon Donner (2007) notes that "[i]n most Pacific Island nations, educators argue that the commonly held belief that the Christian God controls the weather is the greatest obstacle to educate people about climate change" (2007: 233). From Tuvalu, Colette Mortreux and Jon Barnett (2009) report that "[i]t is clear that religion plays a very significant role in shaping people's responses to climate change in Tuvalu. Of all the interviews conducted, around half raised religion in response to climate change" (2009: 109). The islanders interviewed not only raised the question of religion in general terms, the pattern was more distinct, as Mortreux and Barnett noted: "These people believed that climate change was not an issue of concern due to the special relationship Tuvalu shares with God and due to the promises God made to Noah in the Bible" (ibid.). In their concluding remarks the authors summarize their findings: "People consistently referred to the story of Noah as *evidence* that God would not allow further flooding" [ibid; our emphasis]. Finally, the authors note that "[d]espite efforts to challenge existing interpretations of religious texts by some religious leaders, faith that God will protect Tuvalu is such a strong belief within the community that some officials identified religion as a *barrier* to awareness of and adaptation to climate change" (ibid.: 110; our emphasis).

Seen from the point of view of the authors of *Otin Taai* and the officials in Tuvalu (with similar examples Marchall Islands found in Rudiak-Gould 2011), the Tuvaluan respondents are expressing a classical, fundamentalist, or even fatalist belief that God controls the weather and that the Bible can be read in a literalist way. As such, this biblicism may qualify as a double challenge for the eco-theological project: not only do people seem to deny climate change, they do so on biblical grounds. While this interpretation may be sound and close to the course of actual conversations, an alternative, and in many cases

8 For a parallel case discussing Cook Islanders' presumably maladaptive religious strategies and fundamentalist views on cyclones as acts of God due to the islanders' sinful acts, see Rubow (2009).

more tenable interpretation, we suggest, would take into account the wider environment of belief and knowledge practices. By teasing out conflicting time/place configurations, we propose that it becomes possible to see how an eco-theological discourse developed on the basis of a natural scientific linear time-scale may unintentionally co-produce a context of denial.

One place to start is to consider what it means to "believe in" something—for instance that God made a promise to Noah. Bearing in mind that many island communities take for granted the biblical mytho-historical timeframe, in which time is imbued with creational meaning different from causal linearity, we would argue that these instances of belief in God's promise are most likely closer to "good faith" in the near future (cf. Cantwell Smith 1977) than to a *guarantee* or *evidence* that God will not flood the island. This important distinction between faith and belief is discussed in the anthropology of religion (cf. Good 1994), but it is (too) often overlooked in social scientific and medialized accounts. The point here is that the "Noah belief" expresses less a "theory" (in a scientific and mundane sense) about the world, garnished with fatalism, than lived connectedness and a hope for the durability of the world they live in. Thus, the Tuvaluans in case, and other islanders, may be said to be closer to the eco-theological expressions of the values of *vanua* and *moana* and to other deep-seated attachments to the land and the sea, in the idioms of scholarly eco-theology, expressing a *waiting* faith in the unfolding future, a very different way of experiencing the environment than making risk calculations and vulnerability assessments inspired by scientific measures. Pre-Christian worldviews of the divine origin of land in Oceanic indigenous religions and cultures lend support to this position.

The case of Noah and God's promise, and observers' notions of islanders' implicit or explicit fatalism, show how religious change, prompted by the scientific notion of climate change, may lead to a process of differentiation and controversy, co-creating a context of apparent denial. However, other approaches are also developing. In the *Otin Taai* declaration the analogy between the flood and sea level rise is denied altogether ("sea level rise is not an act of God," but a "human-induced climate change"), while other church leaders engaged in climate change awareness-raising activities address the gap between scientific and religious discourse by offering a reinterpretation of the Noahic covenant in the current context of climate change. In this way, vernacular theologies lend countenance to a bridging of the biblical and the scientific enactments of both time and place. The EKT, for instance, has been engaged in climate-change awareness campaigns that make use of biblical-theological sources. The church has recently run a workshop called "Noah and Climate Change" in order to "re-examine the story of Noah and introduce people to other options of inter-

pretation rather [than] cling to the traditional reading of the story which leads people to the issue of denying cc [climate change] related sea level rise."[9]

On the scientific side of things we may add that questions of present and future flooding are also disputed. Contrary to what is shown in the global media, a rising sea level is not necessarily readily discernible on many Pacific shores and, therefore, presentisms are not necessarily readily prompted. This is in line with recent geoscientific research, which concludes that the present accelerated sea level rise is probably masked by both seasonal fluctuations and widespread anthropogenic impact on the coastal system of sea walls, harbors, causeways, sand mining, and so on (Dickinson 2009; Ford 2011). Examples of contemporary flooding, coastal erosion, or frequent cyclonic events are therefore not necessarily expressions of climate change, but long-term patterns of variation (Webb and Kench 2010; World Meterological Association 2006), which may also in part explain islanders' reported ease with and trust in a stable environment. This is not to say that sea level rise is not an important issue and a factual ongoing process, but that both present and future cases of flooding can be caused by several factors. The role of local practices and global processes, and thus the allocations of the responsibilities of God, people, the land, and the sea are thus open for negotiations.

Returning to the question of the Pacific islanders "fatalism", at a general level it is important to note that biblical texts throughout the world's manifold Christian communities are always already read through distinctly different time/place configurations. Literal and symbolic interpretations intertwined with contextual readings form horizons of meaning that make up a multiplicity of christianities sometimes demarcated by different congregations, but also crisscrossing theological landscapes in less visible ways. To see the response we have just described to the Noah covenant and climate change as nothing but a traditional literal and fatalist interpretation is therefore (at least in some instances) a simplification and mystification of a more complex theological conversation out of which new contextual theologies are taking form. Presently, climate change is a new driver in many ways of worldmaking, prompting new, and often revised and disputed, horizons of meaning. From a more global perspective, theological innovation has a processual character, so the interpretation of the contextual theology is also dependent upon a processual reading. While we are not going to argue that there are not Christians throughout the Pacific espousing fatalist or apocalyptic theologies, we do argue that both

9 Personal communication with Maina Talia, the official in charge of addressing the issue of climate change in the EKT.

observers of, and participants in, the wider field linking climate change, congregations, and theologies with questions of adaptation are, at least in some instances, themselves giving shape to controversial climate denying positions by stereotyping vernacular theologies.

Climate change science, classical biblical theologies, and the new contextual theologies with a marked theologically-liberal bent configure different chonotypes. They envision and scale the environment in different versions that are not necessarily directly comparable or translatable. However, the depth and grip of a literalistic approach to biblical interpretation in many Oceanian christianities remain and may become even more outspoken with the dispensational pre-millennialist interpretation of biblical timeframes (Guyer 2007), especially where the framing of climate change makes sense in terms of "the last days" doctrine which, according to Ernst (1994, 2006), is quite common amongst Oceanian churches. Thus, the controversy has the potential to run and run, and may return in many variations.

4 Recent Theologies of Climate Change: A Place and a Time for the Interconnectedness of Land, Sea, and Sky

We pointed out earlier that the PCC called for the deconstruction of classical Western theology and a reconstruction of eco-theologies from the Oceanian perspective. In this section we look at the contribution of Winston Halapua as an example of an emerging eco-theology and of the critique of classical Western theologies from a contextual perspective. This contribution could be seen as typifying Oceanian theologians' strivings toward meaningful living in time and place, where place is perceived to be eroding and sinking and time punctuated by urgent presentisms and long-term futurisms. The questions arising in these theologies are: if the "sinking" of Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands is perceived as the consequence of rising sea levels induced by climate change, how might the ocean be theologized in a new way? How might classical theologies that are deeply embedded in christianities in Oceania be rearticulated in appropriate ways that give meaning and hope?

In *Waves of God's Embrace* (2008) and in a subsequent article (2010) Halapua, in his theological construct of *theomoana* (God the Ocean), theologizes a departure from "a dualistic approach to theology which is trapped in Gnosticism and Platonic philosophical underpinnings" (ibid.: 93) toward an eco-theology that holds together creation and culture and diversities, and transcends the traditional boundaries of the mission of the church. In the context of the violence that people do to each other and to the environment, thereby

causing climate change, and the context of the disintegration of life-giving relationships, Halapua calls for a "prophetic pathway" (ibid.: 7) and creative imagination both within the church and beyond it. Reminiscent on the one hand of aspects of Hau'ofa's *A New Oceania* (1993), with its re-visioning of Oceania as embedded in a deep sense of belonging and oneness with the ocean, "[w]e are the sea, we are the ocean" (ibid.: 4)—and of a call to rise above the colonially-imposed psychology of smallness on the other—Halapua highlights the deep Oceanian sense of interconnectedness, and the *moana* (ocean) as both symbolic of the womb that forms and nurtures life, and something to which human life is always connected. In this reconfiguration of the sea, Halapua seeks to transform "the hostile and chaotic perception" of the sea in Hebrew cosmology into something that is life giving from the gospel narratives of Jesus' journeys across Lake Galilee. Thus waves of the *moana* bring a sense of God's embrace—God's love-grace, faithfulness, provision, care, and greatness—that is relational and mysterious. God's word to humanity is Jesus Christ, and he is the basis for the gift of *talanoa*, that is "godly conversation and profound listening" (ibid.: 95), between peoples and their interconnectedness to the *moana*—an interconnectedness that is inclusive of the ocean, land, and sky.

Halapua's theology is also a move toward a contextual affirmation of the doctrine of the omnipresence of God and God's Spirit. The hope expressed in the texts by Halapua and in the wider vernacular and contextual theological field is that it would help to recover the sense of the sacred in the land, sea, and sky that waned dramatically under the influence of early Christian missionaries, and contribute to restoring the sacredness and solemnity that characterized peoples' relationships with each other and with nature (cf. Bird 2008, 2009). Moreover, the intention is that it could also enhance a sense of "the fellowship of the Spirit" that is not only communal but also relational and propose a rethinking of the prevailing theology of the Spirit—a theology that is primarily and almost exclusively for salvation of the soul of an individual and for the ministry and growth of the church. This also addresses the concern by Pannenberg (1975) that classical Western theology of the Spirit is primarily soteriological and divorced from nature, with which Moltmann (1992: 8) agrees: "[…] Protestant and Catholic theology […] view the Holy Spirit solely as the *Spirit of redemption*. Its place is the church […] This redemptive Spirit is cut off from bodily life and from the life of nature."

In the context of ecological crisis and climate change, liberal theological versions thus express a need for theologies that are more Earth-oriented and that do not have an overtly other-worldly focus; theologies that appreciate interconnectedness but do not also ignore contradictions; theologies that include societal and/or communal aspects of salvation; and theologies that stress security-

creating harmony in the present with a hope-filled view of the future. On the one hand, this is an understanding that speaks out against the idea of salvation as an other-worldly, spiritualistic, individualistic, and futuristic eternal existence, and the sole work of a sovereign and transcendent God, with no connection to concreteness of the land-sea-sky which, according to Ernst (1994, 2006), is a characteristic feature of new religious groups in Oceania but which is also present in historic mainline churches. On the other hand, this is prompting an underlying ecological hermeneutics in Oceania that emerges out of efforts to go beyond the written text—relevant not only because of the continuity of key aspects of Oceanian religio-cultural values and practices mentioned earlier but also in the light of climate change. Amongst contemporary theologians in Oceania, it could be argued therefore that land, sea, and sky are unwritten textual sources that contain "readability characteristics" like written text, which come to the fore as the impact of the effects of climate change increase.

5 Concluding Remarks

Emerging eco-theologies face challenges on two separate fronts, namely the depth and grip of embedded biblical theologies in Oceanian churches, and the place of such theologizing within the climate change discourse of disappearing coastlines and sinking islands. The eco-theological tradition has launched a critique of the dominant classical Western theology, which excluded the living environment from its teachings and ritual practices, *and* it is seeking to address human-induced climate change through a rearticulation of traditional ecological values, symbols, and practices. In terms of public recognition, this challenge appears immense and may even result in seemingly counter-productive controversies such as that concerning the Noahic covenant.

With the efforts at reinscribing the interconnectedness of nature and culture and the injection of hope in a future into a climate change theology, the Oceanic eco-theology thus expresses, just like Western climate change theology (e.g. McFague 2008 and Northcott 2007), sky-high academic and practical ambitions. As Bruno Latour (2009) has noted, however, contemporary Christian eco-theology predominantly offers an ascetic religious answer to the ecological crisis and climate change. In the present Oceanic versions of eco-theology, the recourse to traditional values is appreciated as a deep-seated resource for the realization of interconnectedness between culture and nature, time and space, prompting responsibility, stewardship, and an enduring hope for the future. In this sense, the near future is theologically recaptured by the concept of *waiting*; yet, as noted by Paunga (2009), most Pacific islanders are suppos-

edly striving for something else: the commodified, urban life. In that sense, it is not only a changing climatic environment that the eco-theological tradition is confronting, but also a changing social and economic environment, which does not seem to be reflected in the contextual theologies so far. In this light, Oceanian contextual eco-theology will continually wrestle with challenges in the interpretation of the *moana* and *vanua* with responsiveness to climatic-environmental and to socio-economic changes. Christian denominations are important actors in the cultural modeling of climate change, but as in other regions dominated by other-worldly, literalist theologies, the problem of climate change is thus intertwined with the problem of contextualization.

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