

Shaping an Oceanic Spiritual Theology

A South Pacific Mission Perspective

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First, I acknowledge the land, the people, the spirit and the hospitality of Korea.

Second, I honour the memory of the missionary colleagues who journeyed with us.

Third, I appreciate the initiative of the local region in hosting this symposium.

Introduction

The 2015 symposium in Seoul invited us to ponder, interpret and stretch mission connections to the Ocean.¹ The basic premise is that we, individually and together, no longer take the Ocean for granted. My intention is not only to reflect on being missionary in an oceanic world, but to also introduce a sustaining spiritual perspective.²

My presentation runs with a simple yet profound understanding that the Ocean³ is a remarkable gift of God. My origins are in New Zealand close to a harbour and the coast where a high value is placed on access to the marine environment. Creation, for me, extends from Earth, across the plains, mountains, valleys and rivers, along the coasts, from foreshore and seabed out into the Ocean.

My contribution is informed by an interest in the historical encounters between church missionaries and peoples surrounded by the vastness of the Ocean inform. Dialogue with religious cultures and alternative worldviews are valuable sources of sacred wisdom and social harmony. The contemplative dimension is ultimately shaped by experience and reflection, plus a little imagination.

A Big Blue Backyard

The New Zealand experience of Ocean is captured by Janet Hunt, an author who writes with imagination of the Ocean as *Our Big Blue Backyard*:

¹ The 2015 Seoul Symposium was the initiative of the Columban Missionaries in the Region of Korea.

² This paper was prepared for oral presentation, Footnotes and reading notes support the narrative.

³ Ocean, along with Earth, is identified and presented, out of respect, with a capital letter.

*“How absolutely it is interwoven with the fabric of our lives. It underwrites consciousness, a silver-blue-grey-green expanse, shimmering, restless, alive. It changes constantly, its surface fashioned by wind, current and undersea landform into gentle swell or turbulence of jagged peaks. It breathes, it moves, it murmurs, sighs and thunders according to mood. It is to be feared but it is also a place of light and reflection, of great presence and beauty”.*⁴

Although the land is experienced as the familiar human realm, a strong sense of identity and belonging comes from an association with the oceanic domain. The seas especially figure in the indigenous worldview of the Maori people in Aotearoa.⁵ A consciousness pervades the region of Oceania that the Spirit of a Creator God hovers over the natural environment of Ocean.⁶

In my childhood and youth, I subscribed to the notion of the time that ‘the missions’ were generally elsewhere, somewhere over the horizon.⁷ With youthful enthusiasm, I crossed the Tasman Sea to study in Australia, and later travelled by ship to Korea. There, in a world-not-my-own, I began a journey into a conscious encounter⁸ with an ancient religious heritage and its wisdom. Creation myths, then evolution and ecology began to hold my attention. Along with social justice issues and climate change matters, my interest now extends to the surrounding Ocean. Nowadays, ancestral heritage, signs of the times, issues of the day, and a responsibility towards the future are associated with the surrounding Ocean.

A Sense of the Sacred

In Oceania indigenous people speak of belonging to a spirit-filled, evolving, diverse world of Earth and Ocean. Religious and cultural values extend beyond the family and the land. They reach out beyond the surging waves, and into the distant blue horizon.

⁴ Janet Hunt’s 2014 volume introduces the oceanic and marine reserves of Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁵ ‘Aotearoa’ identifies the land and the region before Europeans imposed the name ‘New Zealand’.

⁶ Te Taiao Maori highlights the importance of Ocean in the natural world and myths of the South Pacific.

⁷ Mission literature still speaks in such remote terms as ‘The Field Afar’ and ‘The Far East’.

⁸ The notion of ‘encounter’ is frequently used to describe cross-cultural outreach by mission personnel.

People of the Ocean address creation and environment in terms of spiritual experience. They live with a strong sense of the sacred in life. Across Oceania, a sense of the sacred⁹ emerges from the narratives handed down from generation to generation

Historians and anthropologists join indigenous leaders, and each new generation, in acknowledging the vibrant religious culture that has long permeated the South Pacific. They tell of religious beliefs harmonising the workings of mind and body, linking spiritual realities with the physical.¹⁰

Ancestral narratives and oral traditions in Oceania stretch back to the beginnings. They evoke a sense of the sacred, respect, awe, and wonder. Origins and ancestors are remembered in spiritual beliefs and are honoured in living protocols. Creation myths address basic questions about how the earth, the ocean and the elements come to be.

The stories and narratives of origin tell of life born of the Earth, the Sky and the Ocean. The starting point is a void and darkness, with a desire for space, light and freedom. In Maori cosmology, people live in a world shaped by the separation of the original parents, the Sky Father, Ranginui, and the Earth Mother, Papatuanuku.¹¹

Tane-mahuta is named as the prime mover in liberating the offspring from darkness into a world of light. The mythical patron of the Ocean is Tangaroa, regarded as the heart and spirit of the sea, a guardian authority and provider of sustenance for maritime people.

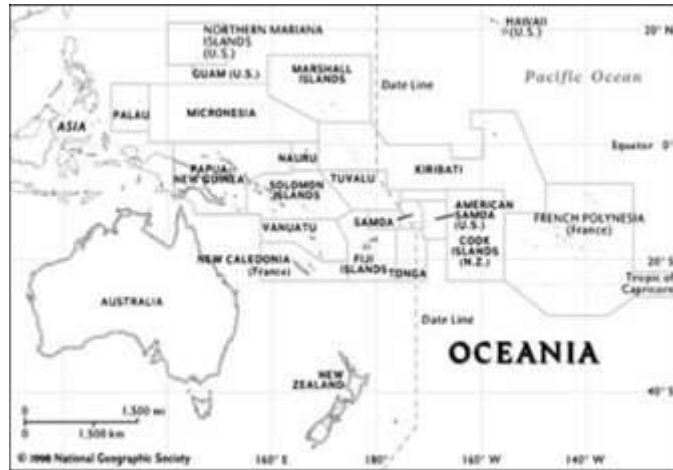
Located in Oceania

Surrounded by the vastness of the Ocean, people across the South Pacific retain and share a sensibility to the rich notion of creation. All of life is born of the spirit-gods. Earth and Ocean are in the care of Creator Spirits.

⁹ 'A sense of the sacred' is a vital expression, related to 'integrity of creation' and 'integral ecology'.

¹⁰ This is an important field of interest, reading and research highlighted in the following lists of resources.

¹¹ The creation myth is generally presented in such general terms, both in oral and in printed versions,



Moana, the Ocean, is not just a wide empty neglected domain open for exploration, exploitation and pollution. A traditional name is Te Moana nui a Kiwa which connotes expanse, depth and mystery. The Ocean is respected and celebrated as a gift of creation and a domain of ancestors.¹²

The Ocean is sacred space. Unfolding stories of origins, ancestors and heritage tell of mythic beings and forces that continue to shape sky, earth, oceans, humans, and the rest of life. Existence and relationships are not deciphered outside connections with these spirits. Spiritual powers are seen in nature, in food, in forests, and weather.

Protective spirits reside in all features of the natural world, among the ancestors, in geographical features and in special locations. The whole of existence comes with a vision in which each aspect of life is related to every other. Everyone and everything that had gone before is acknowledged with appreciation. Connections are made so that every aspect of the oceanic domain is regarded with respect and gratitude.

Cross-Cultural Encounters

My interest is focused on the religious culture experienced in Aotearoa from long before the arrival of missionaries and migrant settlers from Europe. A fresh radical spiritual awakening has emerged for me, intensified through the lens of mission.

¹² The seas are reverently regarded as a treasury (taonga) with resources to be conserved and shared.

An ongoing task for my theology, liturgy and spirituality is to pay deliberate attention to the distinctive spiritual relationship of people, not only with the land, but also with coastal waters and with ocean seas. From this perspective, the notion of integral ecology stretches from the spiritual to the cultural, social, economic, political and the scientific.

In hindsight, I concede with disappointment that mission, along with colonisation, was too often predicated on assumptions of racial, religious, cultural and technological superiority. The arrival of the early missionaries to Oceania initiated what was, for all intents and purposes, a cultural invasion. European explorers, traders and settlers, along with the missionaries, spoke of bringing civilising benefits.

As a consequence of the huge tide of immigration from Western Europe, colonisation intensified and significant aspects of indigenous religious culture were overwhelmed. Through colonisation, assimilation processes, urbanisation, secularisation and other alienating factors, enduring lived experiences and established religious cultures were neglected or relegated to the periphery.

Yet the spirit and sacrifice of missionaries certainly touched hearts and left a lasting memory.¹³ Credit is given for the dedicated heroic responses appropriate for those early decades of the 19th century. They came to bring good news, to convert people and to establish local churches.¹⁴ However, church emphasis soon moved from open cross-cultural mission to organised pastoral care, especially in favour of the colonial settlers from abroad.

What Happened Next?

As mission history unfolds, motives, attitudes, intentions and practices come under scrutiny. Encounters with social, cultural and ecological attitudes face re-assessment.¹⁵ An unsettling question arises: to what extent did mission efforts engage, respect and celebrate local religious beliefs and practices? The answer is complex.

¹³ A respectful memory is extended to the missionary figures, Marsden (1814) and Pompallier (1838).

¹⁴ The 19th century early mission story is well summarised by Cardinal Thomas Williams (2004).

¹⁵ Specialised research now delves into many dimensions of the socio-cultural impact of local mission.

Revisionist and contrarian historians are inclined to tell of how churches fell short in respect for traditional values and sensibilities. Critical reviews speak of the replacement of sacred icons with those brought from afar, and converts who were expected to be passive consumers of mono-cultural packages carried from the other side of the world. Giving up the indigenous religious cultural heritage culture was the price for becoming a Christian.

In today's terms, concern for 'indigeneity'¹⁶ had not been a high priority. The point to note is that inculturation was not a major aspect of the mission agenda. Crucial and relevant mission questions remain: not the least of which is, has much changed? What deliberate interest is now given to indigenous religious culture and heritage?

The notion and the lived experience of inculturation is on the mission agenda and taken for granted since Vatican II. Inculturation is now celebrated as a vital and essential element in mission and church life. The understanding is that a faith that does not become part of the culture of the land is alien.

From a mission perspective, the churches in Oceania are challenged to grow in appreciation for indigenous cultures in the region. A deliberate effort must still be made to bring a unique worldview and a compelling message from Oceania to the wider Catholic world.

Ecclesia in Oceania

Cultural sensitivity, thanks to Vatican II, was deliberately extended to the South Pacific margins when a synod was organised in the 1990s. A time came to finally acknowledge and pay respect to distant voices from Oceania. The Vatican could no longer speak in cautious ecclesio-centric, and Euro-centric terms, about encounters with distant cultures, attitudes and religious practices.¹⁷

Christian faith was now encouraged to be lived and expressed in the style, language and idiom of local cultures. Theological thinking was to recognise traditional culture as well as

¹⁶ 'Indigeneity' is a neologism used in dealing with enduring cultural experiences and realities.

¹⁷ The final report from the Synod, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, was issued by Pope John Paul II in 2001,

modern developments like industrialisation, secularisation, ecumenical dialogue and contact with other religions and philosophies.

At the Synod for Oceania (18 April 1998 – 14 May 1998), Takuiria Mariu, a Maori bishop, spoke on behalf of his people:

“If the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand is to be truly Catholic, we need to be given the freedom to express our Catholicity in the language and the idiom that is ours. Christ must be given the freedom to come alive in us, with and among us, using our language, painting our images, using idioms that are ours and which speak profoundly to our hearts.”

A challenge was declared at the Synod for Oceania for churches to acknowledge the Creator Spirit and creation narratives in the South Pacific from long before migrations and colonial settlement. The post-synod report spoke of indigenous peoples living in harmony with nature and with one another.

Amid multicultural realities, encouragement was given to indigenous and ethnic minorities to retain and express their unique identities. Far more was at stake than simply critiquing indigenous wisdom.

Indigenous Perspectives

A latter-day missionary task is to hear and support the voices speaking from minority and critical perspectives. It means allowing people to tell us who they are and what is significant for them. A core church role is to appreciate and celebrate an innate sense of the sacred.

A Christian community is never meant to be a comfortable place for its members, insulated from or avoiding other or past realities. Communities are to avoid propagating a distant, irrelevant, unattractive and unconvincing message. Mission practitioners can hardly avoid the challenges.

If people from the grassroots and coastal edges of Oceania are to build foundations of an indigenous theology and spirituality, their voices must be heard in debates on policies and laws, on politics, commerce and economy, and on science and technology.

Local voices will address the international community with confidence, encouraging stronger action to protect lands and oceans, especially for the poorest and for future generations. They will be heard on issues of human health and well-being, ecosystems and biological diversity, sustainability and national prosperity, adaptation to climate and environmental changes, social justice and national security.

This is a time to be attentive to how key environmental issues affect the South Pacific: heritage, culture, livelihoods, deforestation, mining, sea level rise, coastal erosion, ocean acidification, changing weather patterns, natural disasters, threats to food security, overfishing, groundwater salination, and loss of water supplies.

The key message is that the oceans are not to be perceived and treated as a passive agent to be scientifically invaded and exploited by pollution, over-fishing, or the dumping of industrial and nuclear waste.

Current Voices

Today a growing body of research seeks understanding on matters of spiritual heritage. Scholars in many fields of specialisation now bring religious culture and heritage into dialogue, not only with theology and spirituality, but also with health, welfare, education, history, agriculture, ecology, and science.

Do we encourage people to dream and show a Gospel way within traditional heritage and culture? Do we appreciate the demands church places on indigenous people committed to heritage and to culture? Are we open to understand the occasional tensions in being both indigenous and Catholic? Are we aware of the imaginative commentators, indigenous theologians and others who contribute to an alternative conversation?

The 1998 Synod papers noted that Oceania has theologians and spiritual writers whose work is recognised internationally. Those drawn into this encounter and dialogue call for wider interest and support. Diverse contributions to theological research and spiritual reflection are becoming more and more important in every mission oriented narrative.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Pa Henare Tate, a Maori priest well versed in spirituality and culture, has developed a theology relevant to his heritage. His contribution as a community leader and as a theologian has been to construct a systematic theology and spirituality from within his tradition. He draws on concepts from traditional religious and cultural experience and presents them as sources of relatedness and spiritual wisdom.¹⁸

Missionaries still tentatively journey in the demanding yet fascinating cross-cultural world. Philip Cody is one who explores and ponders differences and similarities between Maori spirituality and Christianity. His personal quest has been to discover and articulate in terms of inculturation the potential for a mutually enriching harmony of the two.¹⁹

Ongoing Mission Task

The mission task is to engage the cultural and spiritual zones where the Gospel is not known and the church not present. It means listening to narratives of origin, heritage, context and environment. This surely leads to a readiness to absorb and respect expressions of unique identity. The vastness of the Ocean is a source of rich symbolism and religious significance.

A good sense of identity and belonging is needed if we wish to tell a story of creation emerging from the heart of a God who loves the universe and all creatures. Every encounter with heritage, people, culture and spirituality is crucial. *Laudato Si'* spells it out clearly: 'Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. (# 63)'²⁰

The Anglican Archbishop of Polynesia, Winston Halapua, speaks from a Pacific understanding of the Ocean and proposes an oceanic way of doing theology providing rhythm, harmony and nourishment. For him, the oceanic domain plays a central part in the divine plan. From a faith perspective, the Ocean is a treasured gift shaping the religious culture of the South Pacific.

¹⁸ Pa Tate launched his book with a ceremonial casting from the shore into the ocean environment.

¹⁹ Cody, like Tate, covers important concepts and ideas but leaves the field open for ongoing reflection.

²⁰ A focus on inculturation in church life is emerging as a legacy of Pope Francis.

In our faith tradition, balanced by the infinite hand of God, we draw all life and nourishment. Cultural heritages address matters of life to add wisdom and treasure to the nation. Together we search for ways to respect the sacredness of creation. The ideal is to live as partners in life, with Earth and Oceans, the lakes, the animal world, the mountains, the rivers, the birds in our forests and gardens, and the fish of the sea.

A unique view from the grassroots and coastal edges of the region on key environmental issues enters our awareness. We gather experience, identify problems and provide recommendations for action to encourage stronger action to protect lands and oceans for all people, especially the poorest, and for all generations. The most compelling message for the world community now relates to how climate change affects lives, livelihoods and cultures.²¹

Oceanic Spirituality

Mission practice and spirituality is a deliberate exercise to make sense in Gospel terms of the way things are around us. One of the deep down tasks of mission is to understand who we are in terms of creation and how we belong. My backward historical, contextual and personal regard for the Ocean is not without purpose.

A vibrant mission spirituality will be about the way things are, who we are, how we belong, and what we bring to our world. Past, present and future will come together with a sense of harmony, acceptance and belonging. An oceanic spirituality will take shape amid signs of our times and the issues of the day. Three summary attitudes deserve attention:

- *First, a fresh creative imaginative attitude is crucial. Every authentic cross-cultural journey needs to be an exercise of re-enchantment about God, creation, life, evolution and religious experience. This involves awareness and imagination about people, faith, gospel and church; about society, religion, morality, economics, science and technology; about family, home, neighbourhoods, work, food, clothing, welfare, trade, debt, climate change and so much more.*

²¹ Social justice statements on climate change impacts on Oceania, *Small Yet Strong* and *Caring for our Common Home*, were distributed in 2014 & 2015 respectively.

- *Second, a deliberate posture of respect and humble service is expected. Missionaries are expected to be alert as to what is happening in God's world, how they belong, how they participate, and how they contribute. Every encounter with other cultures and traditions necessarily engages the social, cultural, religious and political aspects of local and global situations. An authentic spirituality in this context is not just an optional extra in support of social justice projects and ministries.*
- *Third, a contemplative attitude is essential if missionaries are to be comfortable in a spirit-filled sacred world. Convictions and sensitivity is needed to the ways God is present to our world, especially to the poor and to people living within traditional culture. Spiritual exercises relating to the memory, message and mission of Jesus will allow alternate and fresh images to shape the mission future.*

Conclusion

The aim of the Seoul Symposium is to seek a shared a credible understanding of the Oceans from a mission perspective. There is a shared conviction that mission reflection must not be limited to past endeavours, experiences and achievements. Mission has relevance when it seeks fresh and stimulating associations with real global situations.

My particular interest is on past, present and future encounters between church missionaries and indigenous cultures. The hope is that missionaries will develop greater respect for spiritual heritage and wisdom. The important point is that we allow people to tell us who they are and how Ocean is deeply significant.



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