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"We Are Therefore We Live"

Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story

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We don't have land, we are the land
We don't have ocean, we are the ocean
We don't have relationship, we are relationship
Rooted, connected
Fixed yet fluid
—Vaai (2017)

Introduction

Speaking of this topic of climate change reminds me of the wisdom of my ancestors *ole gase a ala lalovao*, meaning 'the path is always visible underneath the high trees.' Thus, the dominant climate narrative and the promise of sustainable solutions have always been overwhelmed by the controlling shadows of the colonial approaches of the political and economic giants. The world is urged by politicians, scientists, and activists to 'unite behind the science' if we are to survive the climate crisis. There is overwhelming physical evidence and warning about climate change and conflict, documented by the international community especially the International Panel of Climate Change (IPCC). However, it seems we have succumbed to the shadows of a one-sided story, a story that focuses entirely on the secular physical dimension with the spiritual lost beneath a one-dimensional umbra. My belief is that this neglected dimension holds the key to constructive and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis. This paper aligns with Tui Atua's claim that "if we want to seriously address the critical issues that face our world today we have to come up with something that is bold

enough to allow us to say the unsayable" (Tui Atua 2018, ix). The boldness to say the unsayable, in this case spirituality, composed, as it is, of diverse complexities of the eco-relational, multi-dimensional, and co-existence of life, is critical to a new path for a new climate story.

Pacific[1] people have survived and responded to climate crises and other environmental changes for centuries within spiritual and cultural dimensions and still do today. While much of the international community is playing its part to meet climate challenges as informed by science, many local communities also recognise that cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices play an essential role, informed by their own indigenous and faith spirituality and knowledge. This article brings to light the "*we are, therefore we live*" focus of Eco-Relational Spirituality that has been the guiding principle for the climate responses of many Pacific people over many centuries.

Brief Background

What we already know, made popular by scientific research, and confirmed again and again by both regional and international climate declarations, is that climate change is the "single greatest threat to the livelihood, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific" (Pacific Island Forum 2019, 4). According to the latest Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) *Communique* 2019, the Pacific region, more than ever, is experiencing an extreme condition of vulnerability because of forces outside its control. This includes unpredictable climate impacts and disaster risks that can immensely impact on social structures, food security, conflicts, and displace communities. But it has also contributed to a rebirth of an old colonial 'Pacific rush' narrative marked by a renewed profiling of the Pacific as a place of strategic importance. The recent geostrategic competition of major world powers in the Pacific is driven mainly by global development interests such as the renewed economic interest in the ocean and water resources. This interest is underpinned by the blue economic development framework. The Pacific, compared to any other region in the world, has the largest blue ocean geography. The question is whether this may be linked to global economic intentions for a region that is already a climate conflict-prone zone?

There may be good intentions behind assisting the peoples of the Pacific to achieve global development agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (despite the struggle by local governments to develop and implement these goals). In response, the PIF

[1] I have used the term 'Pacific' in this article for specific reasons. It is a fact that we cannot escape from the term, as it is widely used in many political, economic, social, religious, legal, and educational settings. Moreover, in the everyday life of the people, the word 'Pacific' (Pasefika, Pasifika, etc) is used. However, one needs to decolonise the term to incorporate the holistic ideas of the Oceanic moana and Wansolwara. First the Pacific is 'not small and isolated' as assumed by colonisers. The vast moana, according to Epeli Hauofa, reveals an interconnected yet diverse race. Second it does not only refer to the south as in the designation 'South Pacific'. This is a colonial division that left the south to the Northwest Europe and the north to the USA and Northeast Asia. Third it is not an appendage to Asia as in the 'Asia-Pacific' political and economic construct. Doing so promotes a land-locked perspective therefore making the liquid Pacific invisible under Asia, leading to the concealing of the painful stories of the islanders who have suffered under colonial rule. Fourth it is not romantic as promoted in the tourism sectors. This commercial representation depicts the Pacific as a region without issues and therefore needs to be conquered and developed. Fifth is that the Pacific is not exclusive of the diaspora. For further understanding, see Vaai and Casimira (2017, 7-9).

since 2017 has developed the Blue Pacific identity framework to assist small island communities to protect and manage their resources. According to former chair of PIF and Prime Minister of Samoa, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, the Blue Pacific "represents our recognition that as a region, we are large, connected and strategically important" and that it "speaks to the collective potential of our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean" (Malielegaoi 2018). The aim is to make sure the Pacific paves its own path outside of the looming shadows of a narrative controlled by funding giants. "Shared stewardship" and securing a future can only be credible, when the ways of knowing and being of the Pacific people are considered holistically and are integral and vital to development strategies, including climate change and conflict discussions, as noted by many (Bryant-Tokalau 2018; Tui Atua 2018; Nunn 2016; Boege 2018).

Nurturing and promoting this spiritual dimension has been for many years the central role of the Pacific churches. Since the 1970s, before governments came on board, religious faiths, and in particular the Pacific churches have been instrumental in not only producing indigenous and contextual theologies for the region that address the importance of the contribution of spirituality and indigenous community-based knowledge to a vision of holistic wellbeing (cited in Tomlinson 2019), but also in challenging global colonial regimes and neo-liberal developmental paradigms that destroy the natural environment (PCC 2001). Before the popularity of the climate change theme, the church has always been *lima ma vae*, the 'hands and feet' of God to the most vulnerable and marginalised rural communities. Through its local denominations, the churches have been leaders in disaster response, a first respondent to climate and conflict-prone emergency situations and have always been at the forefront of building resilience of societies through spirituality.

For churches to be dynamic and effective in addressing the new emerging social issues such as the climate crisis, they have to firstly critically address their faith and theological foundations to meet the challenges of such a crisis. The Pacific Theological College (PTC), the regional ecumenical theological institution of the Pacific churches, in its publication *Navigating Troubled Waters* (2017) highlighted some of the flaws and has since assisted this internal assessment of the church. Hence in 2017, the Pacific churches, through the Pacific Church Leaders Meeting (PCLM) committed to renewal by moving away from the 'unity in Christ' narrative, that has dominated Western Christianity and mainstream ecumenism, to the 'household of God.' This renewal invites the church to be more equipped with a radical response that is inclusive and holistic, treating everything as a 'living relational household' (PCC 2017). In this household, everything is interrelated and interconnected in a healthy inextricable way to benefit the whole. This household idea is central to some of the ecological programmes that PTC currently run such as the 'Reweaving the Ecological Mat' and 'Earth Justice Advocacy'. This signals a shift into a kind of 'neighbourly relational spirituality' that is central to the Triune faith of the church as it fights against the extractive economy penetrating all aspects of the Pacific household.

In order to reconstruct a new story, the Pacific church leaders, informed by two PTC publications, *Relational Self* (2017) and *Relational Hermeneutics* (2017), adopted 'relationality' as both the lens and framework to inform such a story, thereby embracing a more eco-relational holistic spirituality. Relationality sees the world as an eco-relational multidimensional whole that sustains itself only through a healthy flow of connections and deep

relationships. This also applies to God. In this household, God is no longer that remote monarchical figure who controls the world from afar to maintain divine power, but rather a companion who is part of multiple relationships through the Spirit, and through the Spirit suffers alongside the grieved members of the household. This means that any disruption of harmony to this eco-relational household is a disruption also to the very being of God. Hence God is relational.

The Failure of a One-Sided Climate Story

The issue with the dominant climate change discourse is that it is driven by a secularised human-centric agenda that often ignores spirituality. This is because the spiritual has often been labelled as superstition. This secularised narrative promotes the "we have" mentality that is behind the dominant development agenda. While the physical impacts of climate change on the Pacific are well documented by science, the spiritual impact is less obvious. The dominant climate narrative is framed to focus on science alone, therefore emphasising only the physically tangible things. As a result, this fosters climate solutions from a secular perspective that may not touch deeply the unseen wounds of societies. Hence, we see today that almost all of the climate discussions revolve around secularised climate adaptation approaches. In the eco-relational worldview, climate change has links to the disruption of the spiritual harmony of all. Hence, the search for climate change solutions must go beyond the secular. The issue with the secular approach to climate change is that it is driven by the notion of categorisation and compartmentalisation where things are supposed to be understood in isolation. This narrative finds its roots in the scientific research revolution agenda of the Enlightenment where compartmentalisation is a fundamental tool to achieve logical accuracy and precision. Because of this, 'ecology' for example used to refer only to the physical natural environment. This came out clearly in the work of the German philosopher Ernst Haeckel who also coined the word 'ecology'.

Influenced by Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), Haeckel shifted the discussion away from the rigidity that is accompanied by the word 'Nature' to embracing earth as 'ecology'. He asserts that ecology is about relations of dynamic organisms of the natural environment (Miller 2018, 653). This started an ecological revolution that dramatically changed not only how humanity understands the earth as dynamic, but also its relationship with what is ecological. For the former, we began to understand that the earth has its own dynamic ecological system that is beyond human imagination and should be respected and protected. For the latter, unfortunately, it also sets the stage for a non-relational compartmentalised narrative where ecology is referred to only as the 'natural environment'. Since then, all scientific theories, development frameworks, educational studies, and theological reflections were hijacked by this narrative. It fostered a perception that everything human is not ecological, but everything ecological belongs to the human. This underpins the human arrogance of presuming unfettered dominion over what is not human and is reinforced by the Eurocentric education system where ecology or the Earth is often structured as a separate discipline from that of anthropology, economy, or theology. This approach fails to see everything as ecologically distinct yet inextricably ecologically related. And from this failure we normalise the compartmentalised narrative that shapes climate discussions today, and continues to advance human-centric development at the expense of everything else. And the consequences are colossal. The following are some examples.

Firstly, this compartmentalised ecological narrative is a foreign concept to the Pacific. Hence climate change is becoming so political that we begin to develop solutions that are not ground-up and belonging to communities but rather belong to international development agendas that benefit a dominant system. Rather than retrieving local adaptive and resilient strategies that are free, cheaper, and readily available to local communities, both international and local consultants who are often referred to as 'climate experts' impose foreign ecological strategies that are expensive, non-sustainable and could only function well in their contexts of origin. This dominant development approach, which is also taught in mainstream education, promotes a destructive racism that has become entrenched in the thinking and the cultures of the Pacific people. This racism is nurtured for example in the colonial 'dependency syndrome' that has been challenged since the 1970s by many Pacific politicians such as Sir Ratu Kamisese Mara from Fiji who proposed the 'Pacific Way', Hon. Walter Lini from Vanuatu who proposed the 'Melanesian Way', and Hon. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese from Samoa who in his life promoted the 'Relational Way'. To be mentioned from the academic side are Epeli Hauofa, Konai Thaman, and Albert Wendt who promoted the importance of Pacific home-grown paradigms and models of education. From the church side it was Sir Leslie Boseto, Sione Amanaki Havea, Sevati Tuwere, and Winston Halapua who argued the importance of Pacific indigenous contextual theologies that promote community-based holistic approaches to life.

Today in the community context, this 'dependency syndrome' is often supported through the use of high-level international climate language about which ordinary minds struggle to make sense. The conceptual vagueness behind many terminologies such as 'ecology', 'climate change', 'carbon emission', 'adaptation', 'mitigation', and 'resilience' for example, make it challenging to ascertain how these concepts can really assist with dealing with the crisis locally. Hence on top of the climate crisis in the local communities is the translation crisis. Most consultants do not make an effort to strip these terminologies of their colonial connotations nor try to use the local vernacular of the people to frame climate discussions. Because of this, what used to be common sense climate response for local communities suddenly doesn't appears to make any sense. As a result, there is a promotion of the 'local community knows little' attitude that has always been a part of funding cultures' attitudes. Despite the fact that some of the work of the people mentioned above did not address the climate crisis directly, nevertheless they sparked a movement of decolonisation of the mindset and a renewal of thinking that approaches issues like climate change in an alternative way, a way that is Pacific and ground-up.

Secondly, because of the deep connection of the people to the land and vice versa, the compartmentalised narrative, which shapes many sustainable development frameworks, fails to see the effects of displacement and relocation on the indigenous knowledge of the local communities. That is, displacements will always be accompanied by the loss of indigenous community-based knowledge. Knowledge is not separate from the land. The loss of land has a direct implication for the loss of cultures and language. Despite the work done by some organisations such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to foster a link between indigenous cultures, spirituality, and conservation, and to challenge mainstream development models (IUCN 2019), most of these models are conceptualised and tested in the global north. Hence the cultures and spirituality of the local communities

in the Pacific for example have often been overlooked. These frameworks were developed according to the aspirations of a different context that either do not work in contexts outside of their origin, or do not take into consideration the relational cultures that are central to the survival of other contexts. As discussed above, while the PIF has made sure the Pacific creates its own sustainable development model such as the Blue Pacific identity. The question is how much of this is uniquely Pacific and not driven by the capitalist agenda that frames the Blue Economy that has been created to promote the global north's economic values? Values "that are in direct tension with Pacific indigenous ideas and understanding of human ecology and which contradict Pacific notions of sustainability" (Vakauta 2018). Will the Blue Pacific concept really have the ability to address the inherent racism that privileges a particular mainstream body of knowledge at the expense of an alternative way of knowing, found in the Pacific, community-based and inextricably linked to the land and ocean?

Thirdly, while we acknowledge the fact that the Pacific islands are severely impacted by climate change and conflicts, we see more and more the popularity of the language of 'vulnerable Pacific', 'sinking islands' or 'drowning people' in most climate discussions. While it is important that the climate narrative is drawing attention to the vulnerability of the Pacific, based on international scientific data, what is less recognised is the resilience work already conducted by islanders on the ground who address the crisis without the need of any financial assistance. The power of resilience is in community cooperation. Hence this kind of perception, as Jenny Bryant-Tokalau rightly suggests, gives justification to a "victims approach"; that the Pacific countries are helpless and therefore in desperate need of financial assistance to make things work (2018, 49). This has consequences. It could ignore indigenous knowledge and how that has the potential to create local adaptive and resilient strategies. It could give power to rich donors to continue to offer loans to helpless countries who don't have the means and resources to pay back these loans. But also, it could be used to justify the existence of some powerful individuals and organisations who use this "victims approach" in the Pacific for capital or personal gain.

Fourthly, since the emergence of the one-sided ecological narrative is confined to the natural environment, our mindsets have been hardwired to think that "ecology" is a synonym for the natural environment. The neoliberal capitalist philosophy of growth thrives within this one-dimensional narrative because one of its goals is the extraction of the visible material such as the land and the ocean. This philosophy promotes the 'more is better' development paradigm where the concepts of more, increase, and growth, are placed against concepts such as less, decrease, and loss. This *either/or* dualistic thinking shapes the whole idea of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic growth. The more we extract and produce, the better the economy. To have less is often viewed as an economic loss. Hence behind the so-called 'warming war' that Kirsten Davis and Thomas Riddell talk about in relation to climate change (2017) is the war over resources fueled by competition, even the minimal resources that the Pacific communities depend on. In the context of this way of thinking, people are connected not because of mutual relationships but rather because of competition over limited visible resources that the other person or community has. This creates fear, hopelessness and scarcity of spiritual life. Hence because of this *either/or* way of thinking that influences economic growth, even the idea of wellbeing is measured by money and competition and not by the communities' security; someone's life and gain

become someone else's death and loss. The obsession for growth based on 'the visible material' is at the heart of the climate crisis. We see today that someone's gain in the global north that has contributed immensely to climate change has become the death and loss in the global south. This loss is not just a loss of the natural environment. It is also the loss of cultures, language, relationships, and social structures. Our current knowledge of climate and adaptive models are so confined to visibility. As a result, when we talk about climate change, it is an ecological issue only of the visible physical environment, not an issue that affects everything, including that which is not visible. What is seldom realised today is that there is no security without spiritual security. No wellbeing of the individual without the wellbeing of the whole. The visible cannot be healed unless the spiritual is healed. Because of the inextricable relation of the whole, the 'damaged physical' also indirectly affects all other life dimensions such as humanity, culture, identity, gender, economy, and social structures, to name a few.

And lastly, I have discussed above how the many developmental strategies have compartmentalised things according to disciplines. One basic example, which I believe has strongly impacted on the debate about the climate crisis, is the splitting of the *oikos triplets* of ecology, economy, and *oikoumene*. While all three have their root in the Greek concept *oikos*, meaning household, the three were meant to stay connected. However, like the stolen generation of Australia, each were stripped of their mutual connections and were stolen by the different empires to serve their agendas. Ecology was stolen by the scientific research empire, turned into a mere object that can be extracted, categorised, and objectively studied. Economy was stolen by the capitalist empire, stripped of its original intention of 'managing a home', and turned into a money-making institution. As a result, we see today a climate narrative that dominantly revolves around economic development. Climate talks and agreements are determined by whether the dominant economic models would be affected or not. And the creators of these models would do whatever it takes to protect their economy while many countries are suffering. *Oikoumene* was stolen by Christianity, turned into a human-centric system that serves the interests of the Christian empire. Thus, for many years, *oikoumene* has been referred to as a fellowship of Christian churches who come together in unity under Christ. Economy and ecology were hardly featured in ecumenical discussions nor seen to be central to ecumenical theology. The consequence of this sharp split is that economy without ecology is aggressively capitalist, *oikoumene* without ecology is brutally human-centric, and economy without *oikoumene* is cruelly secular.

Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality

For a long time, spirituality has been relegated to the background when it comes to development, security, and climate change discussions. Today the very issues that we are facing, such as climate change, have spiraled uncontrollably because of the disconnection from life-affirming spirituality, fundamental to both in the indigenous cultural and faith traditions. In the Pacific, to achieve 'fullness of life for all', spirituality is key. This is why relationality is very important to achieving a holistic spirituality. In the eco-relational worldview, there is no clear separation between what we normally call the 'physical' and the 'spiritual'. Life is holistic. The effect on one aspect has radical consequences on the whole. This is also at the heart of the church's Trinitarian faith. The Trinity is not about the 'one God' but rather about the inextricable relationship of the diverse whole that constitute the One, therefore when

one is affected, all are affected. When one suffers, all suffer. This Trinitarian deep relationality is a principle that has and still underpins the understanding of life in most indigenous cultures of the Pacific (see Vaai 2014).

Eco-relational spirituality promotes the "we are" over the "we have". It is multi-dimensional as it embraces and respects the relationships that are visible, but most importantly those that are invisible to human knowledge, such as air, ancestors, the invisible underground world of trees, and the invisible domains of the ocean, to name a few. Eco-relational spiritual consciousness is when we 'realise' that what we know is not all there is. What we are is more than what is already scientifically accounted for. When we reach this consciousness, we realise that only by acknowledging and respecting what the Polynesians called the va (relational spaces) with everything visible and invisible, will we be able to respond effectively to healing the world. Eco-relational spirituality allows us to redeem ourselves from the curse of 'ownership' and making everything 'our property'. 'Ownership' is a foreign concept. It fuels a 'we have' mentality towards everything. We, as Pacific islanders, grew up being taught the 'we are' way of thinking, that the earth is part of us. The 'we have' promotes competition over limited resources of the earth. The 'we are' means that the earth 'owns' us and not the other way around. It is a principle that decentralises power and production to achieve responsible economic management. It promotes the idea of "enoughness" that encourages sharing and distribution of wealth equitably and challenges greed and individualism found in the 'more is better' paradigm. In the 'less yet more' relational development paradigm, having less does not mean loss; rather the health of the economy of the individual is measured by the health of the economy of the whole, a subversive economic system that promotes the gain of the whole rather than just the individual. Hence fullness of life for the individual is achieved only in the wellbeing of the whole. This idea is at the very heart of the Christian gospel and its Trinitarian focus. Part of this 'we are' relationship is for humans to acknowledge that there are complex systems and multiple non-human relationships that are invisible to us and therefore must be respected. We are only here because of them, only alive because they are. Eco-relational spirituality is genuine when we allow space for the physical and spiritual to achieve their state of balance.

Eco-relationality is not a system per se. It is life. A dance or flow of relational harmony into everything. For the sake of sustainability, relationality was adopted by islanders to resist anything that promotes greed and centralises the control of resources. That is why, from an eco-relational perspective, compartmentalisation is a colonial tool created to destroy this way of life; it homogenises the flow of life and resources. Because of this eco-relational thinking, Pacific people grew up in full recognition of eco-relationships; they think in terms of eco-relationships, and they do things in the light of eco-relationships. These eco-relationships, which people are meant to image and continue, were already part of God's Trinitarian formula manifested in many aspects of their indigenous cultures. For example, the 'Earth Trinity' of Land, Sea, and Sky (LSS) is structured relationally, after the 'Divine Trinity' of the Father, Son and Spirit (FSS), flowing from one to the other, drawing strength and sustainability from the other. In this regard, anything that fractures this interdependence and inextricable connection violates the Trinitarian relational structure of life, and therefore has to be healed immediately, or else it affects the whole of life. Pacific islanders grew up in a life that is more than the assumed individualised self, a life formed into an infinite multiplicity of becoming (see Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017).

Eco-relational spirituality understands the world and life as non-compartmentalised, that everything in life is multi-dimensional, distinct and different yet mutually and inextricably related. It is a spirituality shaped by the *both/and* philosophy as opposed to the *either/or* philosophy that underpins the compartmentalised way of thinking of the global north. Pacific indigenous terms such as vanua, fenua, fanua, aba, have dual meanings connoting *both* land *and* people. So, when Fiji say tamata ni vanua, vanua ni tamata, meaning 'the people is the land, the land is the people', it highlights how one can only find meaning in the other; they cannot exist in isolation. Things are not supposed to be viewed as conflicting opposites. Both communality and individuality, self and relations, secular and sacred, God and the world, darkness and light, should be woven together in eco-relational harmony. Eco-relationality is the sum of unity and distinction, connection and difference, or communality and individuality. In many island cultures, for the sake of 'fullness of life for all', eco-relationality is the interpretive key to life and wellbeing. Islanders grew up 'with and in' stories that all of life is an 'assemblage of relationality'; that things exist as a differentiated whole, not in isolated compartments. In this framework, one cannot exist without the other, therefore one can only be understood and find meaning in the other. This is why many island communities have their own unique eco-relational wisdoms that are expressed in their stories, rituals, poem, songs, theologies, and arts.

For many years, many Pacific islanders have maintained this state of harmony and balance through their life-affirming value systems. That is why islanders have promoted relational principles and values such as sautu in Fiji, va or wa in many Polynesian cultures, fakaaloalo in Tuvalu, fakaapaapa in Tonga, piri'anga in Niue, thalaba in Kanaki New Caledonia, and gudpela sindaum in Papua New Guinea, to name a few. These are not just principles of life. They are principles of security and sustainability that control greed and manage adaptability and resilience. For example, in Fiji, sautu means that life can be achieved only through 'good health and wellbeing' for all. Sau reflects "being imbued with mana arising from one's position or performance of role" and Tu "is to rise following a successful discharge of one's duty" (Tuwere et.al 2015). Sautu is about family and community wellbeing that is self-sustaining. This sautu is critical when it comes to post natural disasters for example where each member of the community is supposed to perform his/her duty to make sure that sautu is achieved as early as possible. The absence of sautu makes it very hard for the community to come to terms with adaptation. For the Mä'ohi people, the concept of ôpü, the seat of life, thought, idea, and wisdom, which is embodied in the mutual relationships of land, ocean and sky, is fundamental in the constitution and achieving of wholeness of well-being. The ôpü, is disturbed whenever there is disturbance of this mutuality (Pohue 2018). In Samoa, Tonga, and Maori, when they speak of the va or wa, it is a paradigm that outlines the security as well as harmony and balance that can be achieved only through respecting relational spaces. It acknowledges and respects the multi-dimensional yet inextricable interconnected spirituality that was meant to be there from the beginning in order to control the desire to control. These principles of life call for making space and room for the invisible dimensions of life to flourish and benefit the cycle. They are non-anthropocentric, non-compartmentalised principles of life. These can only work through community cooperation, a "*we are, therefore we live*" approach that has always worked during climate crises. They focus on the "we live" rather than the "I live". And when translated into a development agenda, it should reflect the "we are" rather than the "we have" (see Vaai and Casimira 2017).

Because eco-relationality encompasses everything and gives direction to systems of values, principles, choices, and relationships, it holds the power to express the community's sense of identity and the concomitant orientation of life and devotion, what is clear then is that ecology does not refer only to the natural environment as assumed by the global north. Everything is relationally ecological. And from this perspective, ecology is a whole, woven into all dimensions of life. The earth reminds us of our deep connection because we not only share the same ground, water, and air, we are also made of the same materials. We don't have these. Rather "we are" because of these. For example, in Samoa the concept tagata (person) is deeply grounded in this "we are" construct. It is never individualistic nor gender specific (Vaai 2014). The word for soil (eleele) is the same as the word for human blood. The word for the earth (palapala) is also the same word for human blood. The word for placenta (fanua) that holds the unborn baby in the womb of a mother is the same as the word for land and community. The word for the rocks/stones (fatu) is the same as the word for the human heart. The word for roots of a tree (a'a) is the same word for human genealogy. The word for tongue (laulaufaiva), which literally means 'to distribute a catch', connotes a system of distribution of resources rather than a system of digestion. When the newborn's umbilical cord is severed, a ritual is performed to bury this in the ground to reconnect the newborn to the land of ancestors. In this deep connection we cannot claim that 'it is me'. Because what I have 'in me' belongs to someone else. In other words, we human beings are ecological through and through. Tagata is a 'walking earth' and the earth is a 'living community'. There is no disconnection of the earth and the people or a disconnection of life. In this respect, we go back to the Trinitarian structure of life mentioned before that because of this "we are" structure, when one is affected, all are affected. When one suffers, all suffer. This is the reality of an eco-relational spirituality, that is also Trinitarian, that is either denied or misunderstood by the current climate change discourse.

The Challenge of Eco-Relational Spirituality on Climate Change

Today we live through the greatest crisis of human history, that is, climate change, brought about by the age of the Anthropocene where human activity has profound and irreparable effects on all of life. If we continue with this one-sided story of climate change that focuses on the physical materiality, we continue to endorse the Anthropocene. Some have argued for the replacement of the Anthropocene (destruction of all eco-systems) with the Ecocene (protection of all ecosystems) (Boff 2015, 6). However, this proposal still continues to endorse the compartmentalised narrative challenged here. From church leaders, to politicians, to academics, and to young climate advocates, many have argued that indigenous people hold the key to solutions to climate change. While this is true, the challenge is how will indigenous and faith spirituality find its way into the realm of the 'lords of the economy' who control the politics of climate change. If we are to effectively engage with the climate issue, we need some recommendations for this eco-relational spirituality to reframe the climate change story.

First is the centrality of spirituality. A change of humanity is possible when there is a solid spirituality that underpins such change. When we have a vision "to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing" as Pope Francis quoted Patriarch Bartholomew (Pope Francis 2015, 15), we have to be bold to change our human foundation with a spirituality that is holistic and life-affirming. Eco-relationality has

the ability to slow down the instantification of life or what Pope Francis calls the "rapidification" (2015, 23) of life. When things are rapidified, relationships are normally overlooked, especially those that are invisible to human knowledge. With development moving at such a deadly and unrepairable pace, eco-relational spirituality has the ability to repair and restore. This is because it slows down life to make sure the values of love and care are respected and received by all.

Second is a holistic perspective. We cannot afford to confine our understanding of climate change by following the physical secular agenda. Against the *either/or* way of thinking, eco-relational spirituality embraces a *both/and* approach to climate change where any adaptive or climate strategies should embrace both the spiritual and the physical, both God and the world, both human and the earth. It also promotes the 'less yet more' economic paradigm that focusses on the wellbeing of the whole rather than just the individual. Eco-relational spirituality should provide balance to science; otherwise, the popular push to 'unite behind the science' is just "blind confidence in technical solutions", as Pope Francis rightly argues (2015, 19). It means therefore that we need to change the philosophical underpinnings of development. We need holistic philosophies that see life as central. Policy makers should look beyond the narrow physical scientific and economic calculations to recognise the invisible non-physical dimensions when making climate decisions. They should also look beyond Eurocentric individualistic philosophical worldviews that promote materialistic competition to find other philosophies that are subversive yet holistic to underpin sustainable development models and climate change approaches.

Third is a recognition that everything is eco-relational. Climate change is not just about effects on the so-called natural environment. Effective climate discussions should move beyond a compartmentalised and confined meaning of 'ecology'. Because everything is eco-relational, and therefore ecology is integral to everything, climate change should be seen as a challenge to everything and therefore needs radical approaches that are multi-dimensional, multilayered and interconnected. This consideration could also have implications for education. Our education systems should reinforce the teaching of ecology as no longer a separate sphere of knowledge. Ecology should be seen to touch on virtually every single academic discipline and perhaps considered as a "transversal alongside gender, race, finance, health, education, and so forth" (Conradie 2019). In this regard, when climate change is discussed, as least it is not a separate theme.

Fourth is decolonisation of theology and de-heavening of God (Vaai 2014). Some of the church's response to climate change revives a problematic theology of a remote powerful all-seeing God who judges the world from afar. It produces a helpless world that needs assistance and cannot be moved unless God says so. To maintain the power and control of God in all of the affairs of the world, the world has to be engineered as a controlled mechanism submissive to the will of God. This narrative is still very much alive today in the climate theologies of some of the churches. An example of this is the Tuvalu 'rainbow covenant' where God is no longer seen to bring flooding as in the promise manifested in God's rainbow covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:12-16). It is also seen in many theologies of the wrath of God, an idea that often emerges after natural disasters, that profiles some people as sinful, cursed, and punished. The church needs to redeem its theology from the linear obsession of our time that imagines God through the lens of absolute power and control as this tendency

often forces believers to focus on pre-given ends and destinations in heaven, somewhere at the expense of the current struggles and needs. The idea of 'the one' promoted by Christian monotheism can lend its support not only to false hope, but also to a violent condemnation of others who are already suffering from natural disasters (see some examples offered by Trisk 2011, 73-90). The world today needs a theology of climate change that moves beyond the 'power obsession' of Eurocentric rational philosophies and theologies of God that has deeply influenced Pacific Christianity in order to revive the compassionate and solidarity images of God for the victims, and to critically address and condemn the powers that enhance climate injustices. For the sake of hope, God should be allowed to be a God of relationships who is 'down to earth' and who suffers alongside the suffering of multiple eco-relationships.

Fifth is a holistic ground-up approach to climate change that takes seriously local community cooperation. In the Pacific, there is nothing more adaptive and healing than communal cooperation before and after natural disasters. And there is nothing more restorative than community sharing and cooperation in times when the only food and drinking sources are stressed to their limits because of the impact of climate change. Eco-relational spirituality is really about depending on each other. In Samoa, for example, there are already adaptive measures put in place by local village communities to deal with natural disasters due to climate change. Different sectors play different roles. The aumaga (men without chiefly titles) are often responsible for food and water preservation, planting and fishing, and environmental restoration. The aualuma (women without chiefly titles or married to chiefs) deal with weaving and (re)thatching as well as restoring lagoons and coral reefs. Matai, falutua ma tausi (chiefs and spouses) are responsible for counselling and developing effective distribution strategies of available resources left behind by the disaster. The autalavou (church youth) often deal with assisting with rebuilding of infrastructures and restoring the agricultural life of the community. Each group is required to play their role in order for the community to fully recover. Most of these allocated roles and responsibilities are still part of many Pacific island communities today. But what is more important is that most of these adaptation activities are part of the community educational process. In other words, community cooperation needs to move beyond just activities. It should also include developing and nurturing intergenerational knowledge and skills that promote life-affirming paradigms and models to deal with disasters and conflicts. This is an affirmation that many Pacific communities still embrace the "we are therefore we live" eco-relational spirituality. For them, this is not just a guiding principle of survival. It is an integral part of their being as 'tagata Pasefika'.

Conclusion

Eco-relational spirituality functions within the "we are therefore we live" philosophy of life. It is grounded both in the Trinitarian faith of the church and in the relational cultures of the Pacific people. It can provide an effective model of adaptation and resilience during today's climate change crisis. In eco-relational spirituality, balance and harmony are not romantic notions as profiled by the global north, but rather intergenerational principles designed to protect multiple relationships and protect communities from greed and individualism. This spirituality is never about 'the one', but rather about how 'the one' sees itself as an integral and inextricable part of 'the many' within a complex interdependent household. In this

respect, because of eco-relationality, we can never confine the climate change discussions to the physical material dimensions; rather, we have to take into serious consideration the spiritual dimension that shapes the being and structure of the multiple relationships in the household. The church, religious faiths, and indigenous communities should be bold to say the unsayable if spirituality is to make a difference in the wellbeing of the world today. We all know that climate change is destructive to everything. What is less known is that the current one-sided climate story is even more destructive. A holistic response that prioritises the differentiated yet inextricable harmony of the whole and that diverges from the dominant path created by the political and economic giants is needed if we are to change the climate change story. Perhaps what is needed now is to find ways for this eco-relational spirituality to shape policy-making and the creation of development models.

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