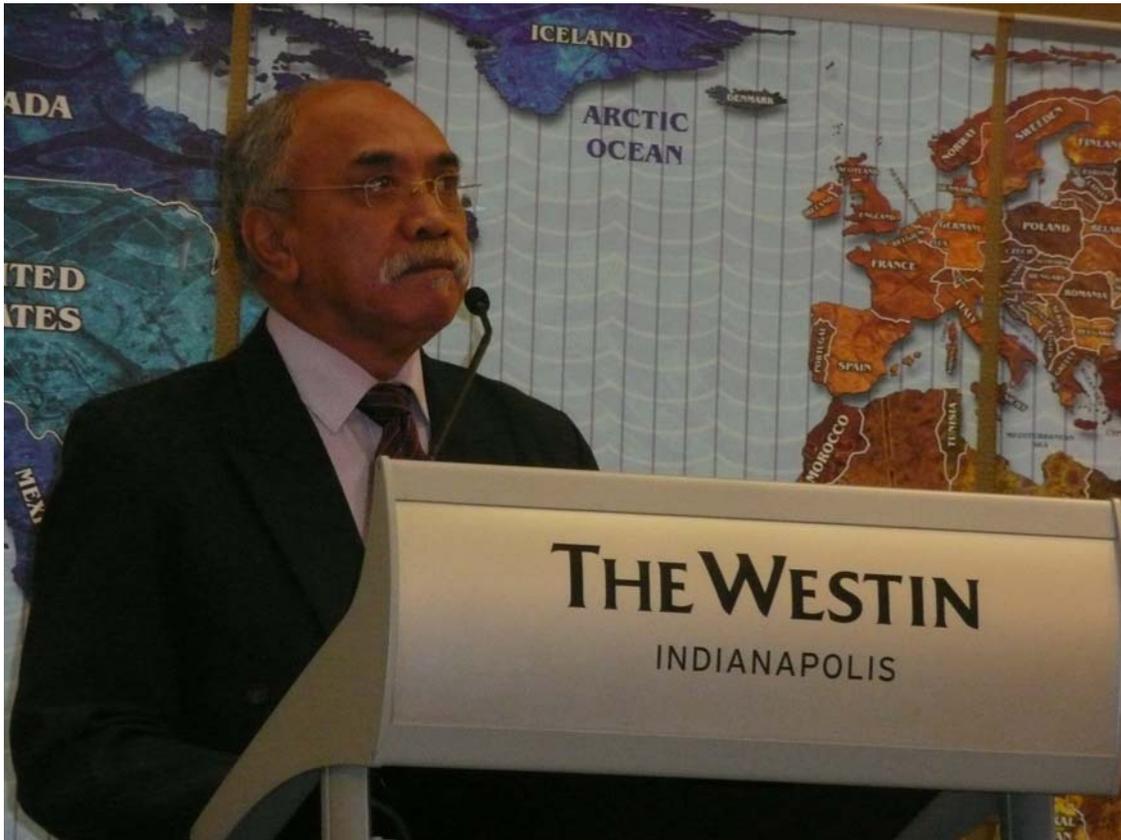


Presentation prepared for the General Assembly of the Church Disciples of Christ
Indianapolis, OH USA
July 2009

NAVIGATING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER



1. Introductory Remarks

“It will happen afterward that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions” (Joel 2: 28).

What this biblical text says to me is that God speaks to the old and the young and not exclusively to either – thus imposing an imperative of mutual respect and dialogue. I am not embarrassed or ashamed to say, that the impasse in the current performance of many cultures may find a breakthrough in the genius of the young, for it does not diminish leadership of the older generation to acknowledge that our young see visions.

Navigating culture

Navigation epitomises the culture of my land of birth Samoa: our spiritual culture, building construction culture and navigation culture. Before construction there is a ritual search and identification of the tree/s for construction which is followed by a prayer ceremony. This ceremony seeks the approval of the God of the Forest and pardon from the tree. Seeking pardon recognises that the tree has a life and a soul. There are also ceremonies connected with preparing the sennit and the wood for the outrigger. At the completion

of building construction the navigator and his crew takes turns to read the stars, meditate and pray for good fortune before setting out to sea.

In Samoan culture the ritual of appeasing the God of the Forest and seeking the pardon of the tree acknowledges a sacred bond between man and his environment. This belief system has something positive to offer the most pressing issue of our time, i.e. how can we save the earth.

There is an inherent spirituality in Samoan navigation by consulting the stars, something echoed in our funeral rituals. In Samoan funeral rituals there are salutations to each of the nine heavens. For our purposes it is sufficient to cite only three, i.e. the first, second and ninth salutation. The first salutation acknowledges darkness and the void. The second acknowledges the sense of smell. The ninth acknowledges the mountain.

Darkness and void is a metaphor that symbolises the prime mover's power to create substance from darkness and nothing.

The sense of smell symbolises bonding underlined by the significance of the nose. The sense of smell in the Samoan rituals of *sogi* and blessing of a successor is where you breathe in through the nose the *mana* of the other person through the act of kissing or where the incumbent breathes into the mouth of the successor his blessing. The spiritual contents of the chief's blessing and the breathed-in *mana* of the *sogi*, travel first to the lungs – the custodians of the breath of life – then to other parts of the body and mind.

The mountain symbolises man reaching out to the skies towards God. The mountain in many indigenous religions is a sacred symbol.

This is what navigation means in the Samoan indigenous reference. It is not only the physical and mental skills of taking on the elements; it is about the spiritual psyche and the bonding between man, environment and God.

Nothing brings home more emphatically the issue of 'navigating our future together' than what was said in a recent ABC interview on climate changes. The interview made three significant points:

1. Some of the islands of the Pacific will have to be evacuated by its resident population due to rising sea levels;
2. There will be a displacement of peoples in Indonesia and China due to rise in sea levels and this will impact on Australia;
3. It is estimated that in the next 50 years globally 150 million people will be displaced by climate change.

What these three points signal is that the problems of climate change is not just a national problem; it is a global problem – a problem for all countries, small or large. It is also not just a geographic problem; it is far more wide-reaching. This is a problem that will determine the need to navigate together our collective futures. To achieve this humankind must have a common reference – a global ethic.

Navigating towards a global ethic

Hans Kung makes the point about the need for a common reference very effectively when he says:

“In recent years I have become increasingly convinced that the world in which we live has a chance of survival only if spheres of differing, contradictory or even conflicting ethics cease to exist. This one world needs one ethic. Our society does not need a uniform religion or a uniform ideology, but it does need some binding norms, values, ideals and goals” (Hans Kung, 1991, *Global Responsibility: in search of a new world ethic*).

There is common ground between Kung's position and the celebrated quote from St Augustine, who states: “The truth is neither mine nor his, nor another's; but belonging to us all, whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly, not to account it private to ourselves lest we be deprived of it.” (St Augustin,

Confessions of Saint Augustine, xiii-xxv). Both are searching for a binding norm that begins with the recognition that the truth is neither mine nor yours exclusively.

Sartre says in his preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "...when one day our human kind becomes full grown, it will not define itself as the sum total of the whole world's inhabitants, but as the infinite unity of their mutual needs" (Jean Paul Sartre in Fanon, 1967). In the search for truth or a binding norm I have no qualms in acknowledging that this is as much a moral imperative for our times as the statements offered by Kung and Augustin.

Navigating together towards a global ethic requires finding synthesis in different, sometimes conflicting or contradictory, references. It is not only a synthesis of views, but a synthesis with a spiritual environment that is core to the Pacific cultural reference.

Searching for truths is as important as searching for binding norms and finding cosmological harmony.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE (power point presentation)

Role of the Church

Church role in sustainability

- Powerful stewardship role
- Networks – in and out of the region
- Opinion leader
- Stakeholder in sustainable development:
- Work with local communities – tools for community involvement
 - Church businesses and developments
 - Hearts and minds of people
 - Nurturing role
 - Leadership role
 - Education system
- Critical network at all levels for PI people
 - Respected, owned and adhered to.
- Educate people on their stewardship role in caring for God's creation.
- Change attitudes towards God's creation – in work, at home and in spiritual life.
- Spread the word – encourage others to listen and take action
- Pastors' role as leading figures in environmental awareness, opinion and action at a local level
- Bring innovative ideas and solutions
- Hold governments and policy makers accountable for decisions
- Manage their lands in environmentally sustainable way

Tools - Education

- Curriculum Development
 - Theologians – protecting God's creation
 - Schools – environmental education and environmental activities
 - awareness/ behaviour change

Building the capacity of the Church!

- **If we recognise the critical role of the church in climate change then there is a need for programmes to specifically build the capacity of church representatives in the area of climate change adaptation/mitigation.**

The unique role of the churches

- **Scripture provides a strong basis for environmental stewardship**
- **Education role**
- **Social and spiritual leadership in all aspect of Island life**
- **Land owner and manager of resources and as well business owners**
- **Advocacy role**
- **Agent of change/model ethical behaviour**

- **Legitimacy and credibility**

3. BIBLICAL REFLECTION: PSALM 104:24-30 “Rediscovering the Spirit of Life in Creation.”

The Spirit in Pacific Christianity

From the missionary era to the present time the tendency for Christian theology in the South Pacific has been to view the Spirit’s work primarily in terms of redemption and in the church. Such theology is generally referred to in some theological literature as redemption-oriented theology.¹ Here the work of the Spirit is interiorized or internalized as convicting people of their sin and assuring them of the everlasting blessedness of their souls in Heaven. Moreover, here the place of the Spirit is the church, bringing people together in unity and enabling them to grow in their faith. Thus the Holy Spirit is viewed simply and solely as the Spirit of faith and the Spirit of the church.

This redemptive and “churchified” Spirit is cut off from bodily, material life and cut off from the life of nature or from ecology. It makes people turn away from “this world” and hope for a new and better world to come. Such emphases, while not wrong in themselves, are amiss in a significant way. Let us ponder the question: ‘what is behind this trend’? There are various reasons for this trend but in my opinion the primary one is the lingering effect of the earlier belittling and demonizing of all other spirits by agents who brought Christianity to our shores.

These “other spirits” (in trees and shrubs, rocks and mountains, caves and valleys, in the sea etc) were branded as lesser spirits at the very least and outright evil and demonic spirits at the most, and as such belief in them must be done away with and replaced with belief in one Holy Spirit. Once the local counterparts of the agents of Christianity became convinced of the “lesser status” and even “evil status” of these spirits, they worked and preached against these spirits.

The power of this teaching was such that the relationship that once existed as an integrated existence between people and nature and the spirits, which was marked by respect, solemnity and fear, was disintegrating. An associated effect was the loss of the sense of “sacred and holy” that was attached to nature. If this has been the trend then the question is: what could and should be done to address it?

I suggest to you that there needs to be a shift of theological emphasis and to begin to rethink and rearticulate the prevailing doctrine of the Spirit. I put to you that the time is right to let the Spirit of God out of the narrow confines of redemption and the church into the whole creation. Our doctrine of the Spirit must begin to emphasize the Spirit’s life-giving presence in all of creation, not only in redemption and in the church. With such a shift comes the question: what theological and/or biblical basis do we have for such a task?

Let me share with you three perspectives – the first is based on a new and sympathetic view and interpretation of spirits and their place in culture;

the second is based on the notion of the omnipresence of God;

and the third is based on an interpretation of the presence of God’s Spirit in creation as presented in Psalm 104.

“Spirits” in Culture as “Microcosmic Presence” of the Spirit of Life

Generally speaking it is common to most cultures in the region that spiritual presence in the land is associated with movements such as rustling of leaves and grasses, shaking of trees and shrubs, or “momentary passing of shadows” at the blink of the eye etc, and with feelings that are “warm” or “cold” and radiate from some unseen force, and feelings of fear and “thumping of the heart” as a direct result of some unseen force. In our cultures, the “unseeable” spiritual presence becomes “seeable” through the healing effects of elements found on the land, be these shrubs, barks of specific plant types, leaves etc, through their life-giving and nourishing elements, and even through the “power” in material objects such as traditional forms of money, and in rituals, to reconcile people to one another and to the spirits of the land.

¹Such as Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992 (2002 revised and expanded edition), and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, London: SCM Press, 1992.

The “unseeable” spiritual presence also becomes “seeable” in human beings through trances, exceptional abilities and power, and through the inner ability to transcend self and impact the lives of others around in one way or another, both human life and non-human life.

The pan-Pacific concept for this is *mana*. In other words, an integral aspect of spiritual presence as experienced and understood in culture is that of giving and perpetuating life.² This spiritual presence imbues new life and vitality to both human and non-human life. All of this formed the basis for the sense of “sacred and holy” that was attached to nature. The question for us today is whether or not Pacific Christian theology is ready to acknowledge and articulate such phenomena as “microcosmic presence” of the Spirit of life.

God’s Omnipresence

The above cultural experience and understanding of spiritual presence in the land may not be as foreign to Christian theology and thinking as we would like to think. How else might we understand the *Being* of God as omnipresent? If God is omnipresent – which is to say that God is both transcendent and immanent – where, really, *is* such presence? The *Being* of God as omnipresent leads to the inevitable and somewhat uncomfortable conclusion that God is present also in all other *beings*, both human beings and non-human beings. Moreover, if God is omnipresent by and through the Spirit, where *is* such presence of the Spirit?

These are relevant questions that demand careful and critical reflection in this day and age where the ecological crisis threatens both our present and future well being and that of all future generations.

Let me ask you: as theologians and church leaders can we begin to move forward and theologize the presence of spirits in the land as experienced and understood in culture? Is the time not ripe for us to see and understand spiritual presence in culture as “microcosmic presence” of the Spirit of life in all creation? I suggest to you that we can, and indeed we must. We will not be alone in taking theology beyond redemption and the church; a well known contemporary theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, says that “... experience of the life-giving Spirit in the faith of the heart and in the sociality of love leads of itself beyond the limits of the church to the rediscovery of the same Spirit in nature, in plants, in animals, and in the ecosystem of the earth.”³ Let us take a closer look at this through Psalm 104.

There is a Spirit in that Tree (Psalm 104:24-30)

Psalm 104 vividly tells us that the earth teems with many creatures, and verses 27-30 in particular tell us that the Spirit of God is the source of all life in creation, not just human life. The Hebrew word *ruach* (or *ruakh*) originally means “air,” and manifested in two forms, namely wind (moving air) in nature, and breath in living beings. The two words *breath* and *spirit* are used in verses 29 and 30 but mean the same reality and originate from God.⁴

According to verse 29 when the Lord takes away his *breath* (*ruach*) from the creatures that fill the earth they die and return to dust. When the Lord gives them his *spirit* (*ruach*) they are created and new life breaks forth in the earth.⁵ The same breath or spirit is attached to death and life of all creatures. This spirit or breath is of God. Here death is not viewed as something evil “but as a natural part of the cycle of life ... [in which] God’s involvement in the cycle of life”⁶ could be seen. New life presupposes death of the old. From this passage we can assert the following: death and life of living beings are directly linked to the *ruach* of God – death as the “taking” of the Spirit from *beings* and life as the giving of the Spirit to *beings*; the source of all life is the spirit or breath of God which means that “God and creatures share the same

² It needs to be borne in mind that there is also the other side to this; that is, that spiritual presence is also experienced in terms of negating life. This duality could be addressed theologically but such a task is beyond the scope and goal of this study.

³ Moltmann (1992, 9-10).

⁴ In verse 4 the word *winds* is used, and is here pictured as one of God’s best “servants.” Wolfhart Pannenberg (1975) says that use of words such as *breath*, *wind*, *power*, and *spirit* all refer to the same spirit reality in creation.

⁵ It is important to note here that in most of our Pacific cultures *breath* and *spirit* are used synonymously, and thus it is commonly said that when someone dies breath is gone or the spirit has departed.

⁶ Arthur Walker-Jones, “Psalm 104: A Celebration of the Vanua,” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, The Earth Bible, 4, Ed. Norman Habel (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 91.

breath, the same spirit”⁷; the spirit or breath that is in humans giving them life is the same spirit or breath that is in non-humans giving them life.

This is a biblical truth! This biblical truth points to, and calls for, a fresh understanding of the meaning and the imperatives of “*the fellowship of the Spirit*.”⁸ Most immediately it means that experience of “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” carries Christianity, and Christian Churches in our region, beyond the human-with-human fellowship and beyond the humans-with-God fellowship into the “greater fellowship of all God’s creatures.”⁹ This holistic understanding of “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” has critical implications in the way that we live in our part of the world, in our ecosystems, and in the way that we relate to all other beings with whom we share the same system.

A critical theological starting point for churches in the Pacific to address the ecological crisis is a rediscovering of God’s Spirit as the Spirit of all life in all creation. I say *rediscovering* because our prevailing theology of the Spirit stresses salvation and the church as the two primary “realms” of the Spirit’s activity at the expense of stressing and proclaiming the Spirit’s presence and work in the bodily, “worldly” and material parts of creation.

This *rediscovery* demands a renewed appreciation of spiritual presence in the rhythms of the land, a rearticulation of God’s omnipresence in all of creation and a (re)interpretation of insightful texts of the Bible such as Psalm 104. Our theology of the Spirit needs to both rediscover and recover the “sense of sacred and holy” attached to the land. This is an urgent necessity and imperative for our time.

The greatest challenge in all of this is whether or not we are prepared to make an informed and purposeful transition from our comfort zone of a restricted traditional view and experience of the Spirit to one which opens itself up as a potential Pacific Christian response to the ecological crisis that threatens our vulnerable island nations. Let us contemplate the words of Jesus: “The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going,” (John 3:8).

Questions for Reflection

1. *God’s Spirit fills all of creation* and *God is omnipresent* are two central beliefs in the Christian tradition.
 - a) What exactly does the Spirit *fill*? Where exactly is God *present*?
 - b) Share how this truth could be understood within your cultural context of belief in spirits.
 - c) How might the affirmation that God’s Spirit is the Spirit of all life and of creation be not confined to only redemption and to the church but also be applied to the natural world?
2. In the light of the current ecological crisis how should the two beliefs in (1) above affect how we live in and relate to other *beings*?
3. How might a fresh and (re)newed understanding of “*the fellowship of the Holy Spirit*” shape our relationships?
4. How might this move toward rediscovering the spirit of life and of creation affect our relational ethics?

4. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Re-conceptualising Salvation: Some Insights from Pacific Cultures towards a Relevant Theology of Salvation for Today.

Introduction

⁷ Walker-Jones, 91.

⁸ “*The fellowship of the (Holy) Spirit*” is an integral part of the Trinitarian “blessing” or “benediction” in Christian tradition.

⁹ Moltmann (1992, 10).

The proposed theological direction of this reflection is that there is, or must be, a connection between salvation and the ecological crisis that the world faces.

The reflection seeks this connection through an analysis of salvation in culture and how this might inform a relevant theology of salvation for today. There are two basic presuppositional (or hypothetical) bases for this reflection: first, the prevailing theology of salvation in the Pacific is not entirely relevant in view of the current ecological crisis that confronts and threatens the world and, therefore, it needs to be revisited and re-conceptualised; second, religio-culture¹⁰ (indigenous religion and culture) contains and speaks of aspects of salvation that can be utilized in this theological task. In other words, religio-culture also has significant revelatory qualities.¹¹

The relationship between these two seemingly opposed presuppositions is not one of exclusivism or substitution but one that is, by theological necessity, correlational, dialogical and is open to mutual critique. The challenge in addressing these hypotheses is one of method and substance. What method, if any, would both be academically and theologically innovative yet sound to flesh out the theological significance and contents of religio-culture? What kind of theology would most likely form and “birthed” in this theological process?

Let me make the following clarifications from the outset. First, in addressing questions such as those posed above, this reflection does not claim to provide the answers; rather it seeks to make us think again about the kinds of theologies that we inherited, and which have shaped our life and the views and beliefs we hold onto in the light of pressing problems such as climate change and global warming.

Second, it is not an aim of this reflection to delve into the history of the concept of salvation, or to carry out an etymological analysis of it in the light of Christian scripture, or to engage in a debate on various views of salvation.¹² Rather it starts from what could be argued as the prevailing (popular) understanding of salvation amongst the churches in our region, and from an analysis of a cultural understanding of salvation. It begins from a kind of an “ethnographic present” and an “ethnographic past”.

From the foregoing it should perhaps be clear that I am taking a contextual approach or method to engaging the theological task before us.

From the perspective of the beginnings and the subsequent growth and expansion of Christianity, such a method is affirmed by, and deeply rooted in, history: first, from its early beginnings in the Graeco-Roman world through the Celtic and Germanic (Western) cultures, Christianity went through various periods of rigorous and significant, even irreversible, transformations (Wessels 1994); second, in the latter part of the twentieth century, especially in the decades of the 1970s onward, *context* came to the fore of the “theological enterprise,” especially in the so-called ‘third World,’ and became accepted as a legitimate

¹⁰ This paper takes the position that religion and culture cannot be separated – they belong together as two interpenetrating and interweaving aspects of the dynamic nature of life lived within the totality of a given context. To substantiate this position let us look at what only three scholars say: Barbara Hargrove (1989, 29) describes religion as “a human phenomenon that unites cultural, social and personality systems into a meaningful whole.” Here culture is seen as an integral part of religion. Clifford Geertz (1975, 89) defines culture as “(a) system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards, life.” One does not have to do rigorous interpretation to say that ‘system of inherited conceptions’ include religious conceptions. In clear terms Paul Tillich (1959, 43) argues that “Religion is the substance of culture ... culture is the form of religion.”

¹¹ For a good and concise discussion of the paradigm shifts in the doctrine of revelation see Haight (1990). The doctrine of revelation continues to be an issue for theology. Traditionally, revelation was seen as God’s completed self-revealing work, contained in the scriptures and Christian traditions but especially and ultimately in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, to whom all scripture points to in the first place. In this view, historical revelation was “closed” after the death of the last Apostle; scripture and tradition “propositional truths” contain the totality of God’s revelation. A paradigmatic shift has exposed as problematic closed revelation in terms of written texts. From an existential and experiential paradigm, which amongst other emphases presents that God’s “actions” and presence – including in and through Jesus of Nazareth – cannot be understood without their embodied expression in a particular time or place. In this view God’s revelation is seen as an existential and ongoing self-revelation in different times and places as well, and hence the revelatory qualities of culture.

¹² For a glimpse into such a debate see Stanley Gundry, Dennis Okholm and Timothy Philips [(eds.), 1995).

theological locus, or source of theology, in its own right in addition to the traditional sources of theology, namely scripture and tradition (Schreier 1985; Stackhouse 1988; Bevans 2002, expanded edition).

Popular View of Salvation in Pacific Churches

Scholars who analysed mass conversions in our region says that conversion in most Pacific countries fell “within a framework of millennial anticipation ... a golden and happy future for believers [in heaven] and the promise of Hell for non-believers ...” This has metamorphosed into the current popular understanding of salvation in our region. Let us take a step back and look into the historical root that gave rise to such a view.

This understanding of salvation was part of the primary focus of the various mission groups to the Pacific that sprang up from the Evangelical Revival or the Great Awakening in the 18th century. Garrett (1982, 8) for instance says that “missionary activity was a product of great religious changes in Europe and America”, and Lange quoted by Ernst (1994, 110) points out that the “... Evangelical revival or Great Awakening which swept through Protestantism in the middle of the eighteenth century and greatly affected the Protestant churches of Britain, North America, continental Europe, Australia and New Zealand”, influenced and shaped most Protestant evangelization in Oceania.

This historical context is important here because as Garrett (1982) points out, the Revival and Awakening rekindled the zeal to fulfill the Great Commission, and fuelled the passion to save lost souls for heaven. So deeply entrenched was this passion to save lost souls that Tippett (1973, 21) could still say about a hundred years after the intrusion of Christianity in our region that what matters most is the “great spiritual salvation of man.” Tippett belittles any other “forms of social salvation” (1987, 153).¹³

This emphasis on salvation as an other-worldly, spiritualistic and eternal existence, or “salvation within the framework of millennial anticipation,” continues to prevail in the various expressions of Christianity in our region, particularly in the Evangelical and Pentecostal circles. However, it would not be wrong to say that elements of this understanding are present also within some “sectors” of the historic mainline churches.¹⁴

In this theological orientation salvation is entirely the transcendent and sovereign work of God, not a human achievement and does not need any human participation, and it does not depend on, or take from, the salvific qualities of the earth; it is for the future in heaven, not for now and not on the earth; it is a spiritual and inner salvation, not external or physical or social; it is received individually, not communally and cannot be inherited along family or religious lines. It is noteworthy that Ernst (2006) points out that an individualistic and futuristic understanding of salvation is a characteristic feature of new religious groups throughout Oceania.

This Evangelical (and Pentecostal) position is vividly put by Carson (2008, 64) in the following way: “Our true city is the new Jerusalem¹⁵, even while we still belong to Paris or Budapest or New York. And while we await the consummation, we gratefully and joyfully confess that the God of all is our God, and that we have been called to give him glory, acknowledge his reign, and bear witness to his salvation.”

There are some major problems with this kind of understanding of salvation. In the first place it fails to recognize and acknowledge the “very good” (Gen. 1:31) creation of God, which for us is the concrete symbol of grace or *mana*.¹⁶ The earth – the *vanua, fanua, fenua, hanua, auhenua, moana, pepesa* etc – is the most tangible and immediate form of the grace of God for the people of Oceania. This resonates with what Donoghue says: “... grace in essence is a way of talking about God’s creative, life-giving,

¹³ Here Tippett makes direct reference to liberation theology which advances a socio-economic and political face of salvation.

¹⁴ While elements within the UCSI hold to particular aspects of such a view of salvation, it also engages actively in the world through various program and projects in health, education and economic development.

¹⁵ In the Book of Revelation the new Jerusalem is seen by John “coming down out of heaven from God ...” (21:2).

¹⁶ Of course the declaration of creation as “very good” is two chapters on in Genesis, spoilt by “The Fall of Man,” which 39 books (in the Protestant Canon) later is made good again by the coming of Jesus the Son of God. But did the *fall* of man (*sic*) really change and damaged the goodness of /in creation? I believe we have some important insights to learn from the Celtic theology of nature: “It is the insight that Christ comes not to show up or illuminate the deformity of a fallen world but rather to release a beautiful and holy world from bondage ... and to dissipate the shadows that lie across all creation through the presence of the enemy and his dark angels,” [Donoghue quoted by Wessels (1994, 86)].

beneficent presence to and within all, both personal and impersonal entities, spiritual and material,” [quoted by Wessels (1994, 86)]. Second, the foregoing understanding of salvation can and does lead to a view of the earth as an object and is there merely for human utility on this side of life. Third, it leads to a kind of fatalistic attitude and a spirituality that is so heavenly focused that it is of little or no earthly value. Because this earth is passing, and because everything will be well in heaven, there is no theological justification to care for the earth and no motivation for Christians to sweat in order to improve life and relationships on earth. All that is important is to ensure that ones’ spiritual life is in order in anticipation of eternal life in heaven.

In Ernst (2006) we can see that this “non-involved” type of Christian life spreads throughout Oceania. In light of the foregoing, I would have to say that the prevailing view of salvation in our region is not an entirely relevant perspective in moving towards a theology that re-conceptualises salvation in the context of ecological crisis.

Salvation in Culture

Let me begin this section by outlining the related terms for salvation in one of our pacific cultures, that of the Solomon Islands. At the outset, I must point out that *mana*¹⁷ is presupposed in the view and experience of salvation in culture. The term for salvation is *tinazaputu*, which is the noun form of the root word *zaputu*. *Zaputu* can be transliterated as *pull*, as in to ‘pull out’ someone or something from a present or ensuing hazardous situation, including death. However, the English *pull* does not really capture the substance (or spirit) of *zaputu*. Firstly, *zaputu* is the basic human instinct and action (“instinctive-action”) to reach out to someone who is in a situation of risk, threat, danger and potential death. In one sense it is the human “instinctive-action” in which someone marshals all the “inner resources and capacities” – and “external resources” if time is not of the essence in the present situation – for the safety and welfare of another.

In another sense it is the human “instinctive-action” of *complete letting-go* by someone for the welfare of another who is in an unwelcome predicament. Thus, paradoxical to the negative view of humanity and its good works as “filthy rags”, *zaputu* points to its goodness and charitableness – qualities commonly associated with God. Secondly, *zaputu* constitutes a saving event where there is no human involvement. Behind such saving event is always divine providence, and the *pull* in this case is associated with the divine. Myths abound in my culture where a saving event is associated with spiritual beings and powers, and with concrete elements (members) of the *vanua*, *auhenua* or *pepesa* such as trees, herbs, mountains, mountain passes and valleys, “clefts of rocks”, sharks and dolphins, etc. (It is interesting to note here that Jonah’s saving event was in the belly of a big fish where God was also present in its darkness and smell! Just imagine!!!) From a panentheistic perspective, therefore, it could be argued that God is involved in salvation in culture.

Tinazaputu means both the act of saving and the person or being or event who or which does the saving – the saviour¹⁸ in another word. Reference to a past saving action or saving event is *ta zaputu*. *Tinazaputu* connects the sense of salvation that is inclusive of past, present and, by extension future, saving actions and saving events. This is so because a saving action or saving event today is already a bearing on the future’s various possibilities.

Let me now build on the foregoing understanding of salvation by highlighting some of its characteristic features. First, salvation in culture is temporal and pragmatic. The use of temporal here is not in the sense of being opposed to the “spiritual” but in the sense of being time-related and earth-oriented. Salvation happened both in time and place. It had to do with being saved from such factors as enemies, elements of nature and natural calamities, sickness, hunger and thirst, dishonor and disrepute, death and malevolent spirits and so on.

People could also be “on the wrong side” of the spirits of the *vanua* and need salvation, which offering of sacrifice would normally achieve. Second, a saving action or saving event occurred within the

¹⁷ *Mana* is a widely debated concept, and the point of contention is whether the term should be understood as a noun as in Codrington (1891) and Tippett (1958, 1967), or as a stative verb as in Firth (1940), Keesing (1982, 1984), Hviding (1996) and Hviding and Bayliss-Smith (2000), or possibly as both as in Tuza (1977) and Whiteman (1984). I go along with the position taken by Tuza and Whiteman, particularly in relation to Melanesia. By this I mean that *mana* in culture is understood both as ‘state’ or ‘being’ (noun) and as ‘process’ (verb).

¹⁸ Hence in Christian understanding Jesus Christ is *tinazaputu* both in terms of saving act and saviour.

context of the *vanua* or *fenua*. For instance, a very ill person is saved from certain death through prayers to the spirits, offering of sacrifices to the gods, application of cultural medicine taken from both the land and sea, and even through taking or not taking particular food types. In culture salvation is interactively connected to the *vanua* or *auhenua*, to the rhythms and processes and spirits of the land. Third, and in light of the first two mentioned above, salvation is seen and experienced in terms of the basic human welfare of the tribe and community within the context of their total environment. Human salvation is integrally connected to the immediate total environment. From this perspective, salvation constitutes and reflects the human desire for well-being and fulfillment in every aspect of life, be it health, success, fertility, respect, honour and so on.

Putting this another way, salvation is seen as the absence of forces that stand in destructive tension with life, such as sickness, death, infertility, poverty, dishonour – the life-denying and life-negating forces – and so on. Fourth, as is perhaps obvious by now, salvation in culture stresses the *present* – “present salvation” – but is at the same time not entirely deficient of a future aspect.

Let me briefly explain this future aspect. Salvation as the human desire for well-being and fulfillment in every aspect of life, or as the absence of forces that stand in destructive tension with it, is beyond full realization and grasp in any human (physical) lifespan. It remains as *rove* (hope) of which only partial realization through time is possible. In this sense *tinazaputu* (salvation) and *rove* (hope) exist side-by-side, where the journey toward realization of the former is sustained by the latter. This ongoing partial realization of salvation, however, does not diminish its total reality. Finally, from all the foregoing salvation in culture embraces all aspects of life and not only the “great spiritual salvation of man” spoken of by Tippett (1967). Due to the fact that a saving act or a saving event, by its very nature bears on both present and future possibilities, change and transformation are inherent in them.

What are the weaknesses of this cultural view and experience of salvation? Let me highlight three (to which counter arguments and counter views could be advanced but which time does not allow me to do.) First, it has been pointed out by various theologians that a major weakness in general in this way of using culture as a departure point for constructing theology is cultural romanticism (Bevans 2002, Schreiter 1985); that is there is a lack of critical distancing, thinking and reflection about the culture in question, and it idealises a culture that *was*, but no longer *is*. However, while this danger is real, it is also real that these views and experiences of salvation are not dead and gone; they are not what Phobee describes as “fossil culture,” but are instead part and parcel of people’s livelihood and existence today.

Second, it has a weak view of sin and an inadequate manner of dealing with sin and its consequences (Bevans 2002). Admittedly, and it goes without saying, no culture is perfect and as stated above there are contradictions and life-negating and life-denying forces in culture. This does not mean, however, that culture is deficient as a source of useful knowledge.

Third, it has been argued that a cultural view of salvation tends to stress “self-salvation” relative to salvation as the work of God in Jesus the Saviour. From another angle, it has been argued that salvation in culture is only in “mundane matters” and, therefore, not as important and eternal as in spiritual matters (Tippett 1967). As is common knowledge, it is Christian orthodoxy to say that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, but I would also say that he did not come to abolish the knowledge and experience of salvation. So with these (and other) criticisms before us, how might salvation as viewed and understood in culture contribute toward a relevant theology of salvation for today – that is, relevant in the context of the global ecological crisis? How might such “cultural contribution” to such a theology be enriched by the “Christ Event” embodying as salvation?

Conclusion: Towards a Relevant Theology of Salvation

For the purposes of this paper a theology of salvation is relevant if the following are an integral part. First, we cannot speak of salvation apart from the *vanua*, *fonua*, *fenua*, *hanua*, *auhenua*, *pepesa*, *moana* etc, for to do so would be like neglecting “so great a salvation” that God has graced or “*mana-ised*” the earth with.

Likewise, we cannot speak of salvation without first speaking about it from the immediate religio-cultural framework and worldview in which it is constituted for that is where meaning is made and reality is constructed. Salvation is an integral and constitutive part of a worldview; to denigrate it to a lower level religiosity or as only relating to mundane matters is to belittle the meaning of life and existence for a people, and to deny the grace of God that is the earth. Tuwere (2002), a leading theologian in Oceania, argues along similar lines that we cannot speak of salvation without speaking also of the *vanua*. In the

present situation of ecological crisis the language of salvation must change; the new language must, as a matter of necessity, be salvation of the earth and with the earth.

Second, following from the above, the anthropocentric, or human-centred (traditionally *man-centred*), emphasis of salvation must give way to a more earth-centred emphasis. Humanity is only one constituent of the earth community, albeit one that is supposedly “special” and has yet dominated the earth instead of exercising dominion. Its well-being (salvation) is intricately connected to other members or constituents of the earth community. Without trying to lay claims to a perfect mutuality, and acknowledging the contradictions that do exist, a study of culture nevertheless reveals that some degree of mutuality was achieved between human beings and their environments’ constituents (cf. Whiteman 1984; Mantovani 1984). This inter-connectedness and degree of mutuality must be seen as an integral part of a theology of salvation in light of the ecological epidemic that threatens the earth.

Third, the emphasis on individual spiritual salvation in heaven in the future must be revisited. Salvation can be individual but it can also be societal and/or communal,¹⁹ and it is not only spiritual but encompasses the whole of life. Namok (2006, 126) in his Master of Theology thesis in the context of Papua New Guinea speaks of salvation as both physical and spiritual entities, which for Melanesians mean “experiencing fullness of life [which] is associated with nature as life.” Here there is a close association of salvation as fullness of life that is vitally connected to nature – *vanua, fenua, hanua, auhenua* etc – which is seen by Namok as synonymous with life. In an earlier work focused on Melanesia Fugmann (1984, 281) contends that salvation could be “described in terms of gaining or regaining the ultimate fullness of life ...”

This correlates with the Gospels’ view of Jesus as giver of fullness of life (John 10:10). While there is a future (or unfolding) aspect to salvation, primary emphasis is on the present, and within the total environment in which life is lived, not vice-versa. The unfolding of salvation speaks of transformation, but this transformation is not so much for heaven as it is for the earth. (Heaven does not need transformation for it to be truly heaven!). These must become a vital part of a theology that is relevant for today’s situation.

Finally, in light of the foregoing articulations, a relevant theology needs to see salvation in terms of what Haire (1981, 260) describes as “security-creating harmony” for the earth. It is harmony between human beings and all constituents of the earth – harmony on the earth, which correlates with peace on earth announced by the angels in the nativity narratives of the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. But it is harmony that creates and results in a state and a time of secure relationality of all constituents of the earth. This sense of “securedness” means that freedom and goodwill undergird all relationships. As “security-creating harmony” salvation becomes a relational existence and experience on earth, not an individual journey to heaven, and this must form an important aspect of a relevant theology of salvation.

Let me conclude with a simultaneous reflection on the following questions: *what is “Christian” about this theology of salvation?* and, *where is Christ in it all?* It is “Christian” in the sense that through the “theological lens” of panentheism we see the presence and actions of God in culture, including God’s presence and actions in salvation. But more centrally, it is “Christian” because Jesus of Nazareth “entered” and lives as the affirmation and ultimate fulfillment of salvation of the earth. The connection between the Christian idea of salvation and a cultural one is Jesus the new *mana* of God breaking into history, and establishing the new humanity (Tuwere 1992, 2002); or Jesus as the cosmic Christ (Tofaeono, 2000, 256) in whom “an absolute concentration of the reality of grace reaches its climax point.” Such grace is “not only for humanity, but for all living beings,” (255). From the perspective of theological anthropology, and particularly through a contextual panentheistic “lens”, I am inclined to say that in Jesus of Nazareth God was seen and experienced most fully. Through his being a *particular* individual who lived in, and endured life within, a harsh and impoverishing socio-economic environment that is Palestine, he experienced salvation in “mundane earthly” matters. Here, being *particular* is a strength – not a weakness and not a limitation. Only by being particular, by sharing the basic human instinct and desire for salvation, and by sharing in its outworking in a particular situation, was Jesus able to share in the universality of such desire, for indeed such desire is universal. In this way, too, and as someone in whom God was seen and experienced most fully, Jesus affirmed salvation in (cultural) mundane matters instead of abolishing it, thereby establishing and offering the universal basis for salvation. However, most crucially still Jesus, in whom the fullness of God dwelt, heralded something novel, something entirely new – the coming of the

¹⁹ Rufus Perch (1979, 233) in his Master of Sacred Theology focussed on Papua New Guinea, concluded that ‘Salvation is “the good life”; is social and tribocentric; is past, present and future at once,’ and is lived ‘within a web of social relationships spanning the generations and extending to the ends of the earth ...’

kingdom of God. This kingdom of God in the gospel according to Matthew (6:10) is for the *earth*, of which Borg (2006, 186) says “there is widespread agreement among scholars on both sides of the division.”²⁰ Will the “surpassing greatness” of the kingdom of God discard all that is good and worthwhile, including the benefits of living responsibly and respectfully in the earth? Will it ignore or even destroy the progress made in ensuring justice not only for humanity but for the earth as a whole? By extension let the following statement by the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution, Article 39, provides us with food for thought:

Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood, and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, (Dulles 2002,110, expanded edition).

A (re)newed theology of salvation, and our Christian efforts to contribute to a just, respectful and responsible manner of living in the earth, may not be a complete waste of time after all..

²⁰ The two sides here being those scholars who hold the position that ‘Jesus was convinced that the kingdom would come in the near future by means of a dramatic intervention by God, a position called “imminent eschatology” or “apocalyptic eschatology”,’ and scholars who espouse the view that “Jesus’s language about the kingdom is to be understood in a different framework, one that involves human collaboration with God,” (186)