

CONFERENCE REPORT: DOING THEOLOGY IN OCEANIA: PARTNERS IN CONVERSATION

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With over 150 participants from Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific, including Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, the conference provided many different, stimulating points of view. It was not a conference dominated by tedious academic papers, but, rather, an interweaving of creative presentations from participants, grouped according to culture.

Imagine 10 people from the Pacific, but now resident in New Zealand, sitting around a fine mat and talking about the mat for an hour. Where does the mat come from? Who does it belong to? Why is it valuable? Gradually, one learns that the mat is a metaphor for life in the Pacific Island community. It represents the tradition of the Islands, and figures in many important life events. Then feelings emerged. The intricate time-consuming task of weaving the mat is a job for women. Does the mat then shore up a tradition that relegates women to the “back house”? A younger member in the group wished he could rip up the mat and dispose of it. After a break, the Pacific Islanders were joined by the rest of the conference participants. What sort of mat did we want to weave? Should we add to the old mat, or weave something completely new? What were the cultural and religious strands that we could utilise for the task? Was it our mat, or did it belong to God? Are we, ourselves, the strands? After another hour the conversation had to be cut short.

This is just one example of the sort of reflection behind contextual theology. In a globally-marketised world, it is important to establish networks of conversation between local cultures. In that case, what is special and unique about the way we do theology in Oceania? As partners in conversation, we shared about our situation, and our theology in relation to it. Who does theology? Where, When, Why, How?

The people of the land (Maori) pointed out the effects of urbanisation on Maori language and spirituality. Mrs Hanna Maxwell, of Hokianga, spoke about the promotion of Maori Studies, Maori Spirituality, and Maori Theology. Developments are slow, but she believes in celebrating small victories.

From Melanesia, Vasi Gadiki, Secretary of MATS, Samuel and Judith Vusi, of Vanuatu, and Philip Gibbs, from the Holy Spirit Seminary, presented the situation in Melanesia. Philip Gibbs noted some of the cultural and historical differences between Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. The relatively short period of colonialism, experienced by many in the PNG Highlands, meant that there was not the same cultural alienation as with many other indigenous peoples. Gibbs went on to give examples from the more-formal theology done in the seminary setting, to the theology found in prayer, dance, and song, coming from rural Christian communities. In this setting, people encounter a tension between continuity and discontinuity with traditional religion, and also a tension between a this-worldly and another-worldly spirituality.

Samuel and Judith Vusi, from Vanuatu, spoke about their varied experience of a missionary presence in Vanuatu. One should be grateful for the missionaries' positive contribution, and go beyond the negative experiences. Judith spoke about her experience as a Melanesian woman. Brandishing a knife, Vasi Gadiki illustrated how it was necessary to cut away those elements of cultural tradition that are not in harmony with the good news.

Ann Pattel-Gray illustrated the marginalisation experienced by Aboriginal people in Australia. She insisted on identity, rather than experience, as the starting point for Aboriginal theology. Does everyone have a "fair go",

when racial identity determines privilege? Using the image of Simon of Cyrene being forced to carry Jesus' cross, she said that black people have been forced to carry the cross for the sins of the white colonisers and missionaries, and that it was time for white people to carry the cross, as a symbol of repentance and transformation. Who of those at the conference was prepared to come and take up that cross?

Course participants from Maohi (Tahiti), Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji dramatically illustrated the contribution of Oceanic theology. It is not merely "pacific", with connotations of smallness and dependence. Their theology was to come from the ocean as well as the land. At birth, the placenta would be either burned, or thrown into the sea. At death, the bones would be interred in the earth, or set adrift on a canoe. "You don't own the land, the land owns you." When you are born, the land nurtures you, and, when you die, you go back to it. To affirm this, is to affirm that God is the originator and owner of the land. Throughout the pre-Christian era, until today, when the Maohi talk about God, they look to the land, rather than to heaven, as it is now common practice in Christianity. Land assured the presence and the dwelling place of God, Taaroa, or Yahweh. So, to love the land is to love God the land owner. The loud birthing cries evoke a God, who is in hard labour, doing everything to bring forth justice the fruit of her love. In our world today, we are all partners in the birthing process, sharing in the labour of liberating life for a better future. This includes the pain and risk of motherhood, and the labour to bring forth justice. This must be the basis of the church, and the basis of opposition to evils, such as nuclear testing in the Pacific. We cry out in pain, but the cry comes first from God.

Besides birth, others contributed reflections on marriage, death, and hospitality. Lisa Meo gave a reflection on inclusiveness in Pacific culture. Jesus' blood was given on the cross to include us all in the household of God. Participants were reminded that, behind the beautiful stories about marriage and hospitality, there is often also a story of pain and struggle. For example, women are struggling to claim back relationships that have been lost during the past 150 years. In some countries, formerly, the woman, by virtue of her special relationship with the land, was said to be in

a covenant relationship with God, but now (male) ministers have taken on that role.

It was a challenge for the pakeha New Zealanders, after such powerful presentations. Jenny Lawson chose the metaphor of “home”, and gave us glimpses of the on-going struggle to find a new home in a new land. Home is a relationship, not a place. Whose home is it anyway? Chris Nicholls helped us search for an ecclesiology that would address the community beyond the church. He chose the medium of music, which can give voice to hopes, and give expression to the inexpressible. Discussion afterwards had to face tough questions like: For which specific communities is my theology intended? What are the sources for doing theology in Aotearoa-New Zealand? It comes down to such fundamental questions as “Who are we?”

Before the final service, we were reminded that this conference was a celebration of 50 years of the Faculty of Theology at Otago, but that it was also a “wake”. As one commentator put it, the Faculty of Theology has been “savaged” by the University. From next year, the Faculty of Theology will be transformed into a Department of Theology and Religious Studies. In the past, the Faculty has been known for the role it played in the theology of New Zealand. Now, on its dissolution, it was creating a forum, where people could discuss key theological issues for this Oceanic region.

A meeting, such as the conference, allowed space for voices, which are often silenced in contemporary power plays. Surely it was not a simple matter. To bring such diverse groups into conversation requires politics of patience and trust. There can be surprises and disappointments. Some would have liked the Maori representatives to have had more impact in the conversation. But such a conversation pursues a method, which is not easily managed, for, in open conversation, the content is not presumed. We were reminded how we must reverence each other, even though, at times, it might feel as though we are walking on fields of eggshells. It was obvious at this conference that theology can be done differently. People have different ideas about the theological enterprise itself. Most are agreed that one has to go beyond shoring up the church. But then, what are the basic

questions for theology? Do they have to do with God talk, or lived faith, or ultimate questions (who are we?), or the “soul” of society, or with the paschal experience of suffering and vindication? The final service, with its rite of reconciliation, and the presentation of symbols from the past, and hope for the future, left one with a sense of expectation for further developments in Oceania.

The conference had its share of theological-political rhetoric. However, it was able to go beyond that, to focus on lived reality. This is essential, if one is to “do” theology. The questions were many, often leading to further questions about the nature of the theological enterprise. Often, it seemed as though we were only beginning. It will be necessary to continue. How will this happen, when the faculty has been dissolved? The greetings were still ringing in our ears, and we were already at the closing ceremony. More conferences of this type are needed. But, also, we need the on-going work of scholars and researchers, with courses on contextual theology in the theological colleges of the region.

Possibly, the conference raised more questions than it answered. This is the nature of a conference, based on conversation, rather than precooked papers. However, at some stage, the conversation must go beyond the questions, to involvement in the theological task, in specific contexts. We have such varied experiences. We have to work more on discovering metaphors that can carry theological meaning. We need to be in touch with the pulse of society, beyond the churches, and the communities influenced by our colleges. Thus, the dialogue must continue using every means possible. Traditional sources of theology have their place. But, those attending this conference, couldn't but be impressed by the rich diversity of theological sources in Oceania.