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The Emancipation of Indigenous theologies in light of the rise of World Christianity

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The Editorial

By Jay Mātenga

> Anyone who has been joined together with the Chosen One is now part of the new creation. For in the Chosen One the old creation has faded away and the new creation has come into being. It is the Great Spirit himself who has done all of this! Through the Chosen One, Creator has removed the hostility between human beings and himself, bringing all creation into harmony once again. The Great Spirit has chosen us to represent him in the sacred task of helping others find and walk this path of peacemaking and healing—turning enemies into friends.
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> First Nations Version (FNV), 2 Cor. 5:17–18

When the Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand ask the question "*He aha te mea nui o te ao?*" (What is the most important thing in the world?), the immediate response is "*He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata!*" (It is the people, the people, the people!). When answered in triplicate we look for the meaning behind the literal translation, and the answer can legitimately be interpreted: healthy relationships or community. This edition of ANVIL reveals this as a universally indigenous priority.

When my long-time friend and compatriot Cathy Ross invited me to collaborate on this edition with her and Colin Smith, I was deeply honoured. After many years without contact, Cathy and I reunited during COVID-19 lockdowns. She had seen some presentations I had made concerning the intersection of indigenous thinking and the environment and invited me to share on the subject matter across time and distance (my night, her day) online with the Pioneer Mission Training MA students at Church Mission Society. In 2022 I had the privilege of a reprise, in person in Oxford, with a new intake of students, who made a positive impact on me. Between the time Cathy left Aotearoa New Zealand to minister in the UK and our reconnection, I had grown from a young man struggling to meet the expectations of a *Pākehā* (white/European/Industrial) world to identifying with my indigenous heritage and stepping into the fulness of who God made me to be.

In my article, I briefly highlight the importance of being true to who we are created to be, while also remaining open to being transformed through interactions with those not like us. I identify two major ways of seeing, knowing and interacting with the world by the categories of Indigenous and Industrial, explaining them a little in footnote 7 of my essay. During more than 30 years of serving transcultural ministers, I have come to see that we desperately need a new framework for understanding how people from different worlds can better dwell interculturally; furthermore, *why* people from different worlds should better dwell together

interculturally. For it is in the dwelling together, in all the tensions of difference, that we witness to the fact that "Through the Chosen One, Creator has removed the hostility between human beings, and himself, bringing all creation into harmony again" (punctuation mine), and we all mature in the process.

Terry Wildman has given the English-speaking world a gift by translating large portions of Scripture into the thought patterns of North American indigenous people. In this edition of ANVIL we read how that came about. In the final product, a broad collaborative effort, we see beautiful evidence of harmony emerging from diversity. Once you have read Terry's backstory, I encourage you to go and purchase his translation and step into the world of Scripture read with indigenous eyes. The First Nations Version (FNV) is something of a traditional translation, in that it accepts long-held Eurocentric assumptions about what the biblical authors meant, but Terry did not set out to write an Indigenous theological commentary on the New Testament. He has proven himself a skilful Bible translator and the FNV is a fine gateway into Indigenous ways of encountering the world of the Bible with direct relevance to the world in which we now live.

Further along the Indigenous spectrum we have an insightful reflection from Aunty Denise, a highly respected elder among the Aboriginal followers of the Jesus way in the land now known as Australia. It will be quickly obvious to the reader that her perspective carries the pain of her people, whose culture was straitjacketed by the settler church and those sent out from them. You might find it challenging, but sit with that pain as you read the entire essay. She speaks for a people who were invaded, occupied and continue to be oppressed by colonial settlement, a situation common to a large proportion of the Indigenous world including my own. In her contribution, Aunty Denise contrasts for us some of the differences between Western ways of viewing reality and that of the traditional inhabitants of Adnyamathanha country in what is now South Australia.

While it is inappropriate to assume that all Indigenous people think the same (it is far from the case!), there are many themes common to the Indigenous way of walking in this world. Aunty Denise speaks of the harmony between the light and dark; Māori have a similar view, East Asians also (represented by the ying/yang symbol). She confesses to struggling to read Scripture, as presented through the Western lens, but Uncle Terry's FNV translation shows that that needn't be the case. Furthermore, in my article I cast an Indigenous lens over theological themes in the New Testament that draw out principles that are too easily overlooked in the Eurocentric theological consensus. As I caution in my contribution, there are limits to faithfully interpreting Scripture; Indigenous theologians must beware of eisegesis as much as anyone. But who is to be the arbiter of orthodoxy beyond the foundational axioms that we all hold to? I contend it is neither the Indigenous interpreter nor the Industrial status quo, but instead the Spirit of God who teaches us as we each bring our perspectives into the global theological conversation. The gospel, once seeded in the heart of another culture, takes unique forms and Aunty Denise shows us how this can happen when Indigenous believers are freed to become guardians of the gospel for themselves, in dialogue with others' experience of God in-Christ. If the Western Church does not acknowledge this and continues to buffer itself from Indigenous perspectives, they are, as Aunty Denise says, "missing out".

Thankfully, the discipline of World Christianity that has emerged over recent decades is opening the West to Indigenous perspectives. Thanks to the pioneering work of scholars like Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, among many others, the Western story of the global church is being decentred in favour of a polycentric mosaic of narratives. Each cultural expression of

the faith is being encouraged to tell their own story, as Aunty Denise has, with theological reflection on Scripture highlighted by values important to them, as Paul Ayokunle does.

Paul also chose to emphasise the importance of relationships. Relationships was not the intentional theme for this edition of ANVIL. We wanted to focus on the emergence of Indigenous theologies aided by the development of World Christian studies, but relationship harmony is so common a priority in Indigenous worlds that it is not surprising that it emerged. In Sarah Cawdell's article about Paul Tester's interviews with indigenous South American Christian leaders, a focus of strong relationships emerged too. The leaders' responses seem rather benign in contrast to Aunty Denise's critique of Western influence, and not as theologically crafted as Paul Ayokunle's or mine, but they are nonetheless Indigenously informed and Indigenous concerns and values stand out. They speak of freedom from fear of the spirit realm, which is very tangible to Indigenous people. Care for the environment is a deep concern we have in common. They note the importance of retaining as much of their culture as possible as they live out their faith, even as they incorporate the best of the knowledge of the West and Christianity, and as Christian faith challenges the assumptions of their traditional beliefs at critical points. The health and harmony of the community is a priority for all the South American indigenous leaders and they describe what this looks like in various ways — with the pursuit of peace a constant objective.

Paul Ayokunle dives deep into this value common to Indigenous people. Peace, harmony, reconciliation, consensus, honour, submission to the collective are all part of the same core motivator in Indigenous worlds. Each people have their own words for it. For Māori it is *kotahitanga* (integrated unity), which is attained via a whole range of value commitments like *aroha* (loving kindness), *manaakitanga* (honouring others through generosity, hospitality, nurture etc.) and *awhi* (to embrace, include, support, cherish), among many others. In my essay, I focus on the broader epistemological concepts of *whakapapa* (the creation of new generations) and *whakawhanaungatanga* (the art of weaving relationships) that result in harmony. In Zulu and what is described as the Bantu cluster of cultures, the broad concept of relational harmony is captured under the category of *ubuntu*. Paul launches from this better-known concept into his native Yorùbá expression of something very similar: *omolúàbí*, leveraging it as a principle for healthy church growth.

For Paul, World Christian studies have freed him to develop his indigenous concept into a strategy to multiply churches throughout the world. He shares a concern common to most Majority World missiologists – that Western missions paradigms are limited in their ability to enable the gospel to flourish in non-Western contexts. Rather, if we were to adopt Indigenous perspectives like *omolúàbí* (or *ubuntu*, *kotahitanga*, etc.), our efforts to establish the kingdom of God will be far more effective among Indigenous peoples (which, in my nomenclature, is roughly equivalent to people with a collectivist orientation). As Paul develops the concept, I recognise every aspect of *omolúàbí* by other names within *te ao Māori* (the Māori reality). I do not go into my cultural perspective as deeply as Paul does, but a similarity between the value sets explained should be apparent. Aunty Denise and I delve more into the Source of the values, but Paul identifies their contribution to healthy community superbly well for a short essay. The outcome of these values applied, empowered by the Spirit, can fulfil the hope expressed by Aunty Denise and the South American Indigenous leaders: a hope for strong community relationships, where knowledge is passed on in indigenous forms and the best of a culture is retained, celebrated and passed on. Where ancestors and ancient wisdom are honoured, where Jesus is seen with indigenous eyes, but also understood in conversation with the global church for the maturity of us all. May you be inspired with hope for the future of the

global church, World Christianity, and your own church, as you take time to digest this edition of ANVIL.

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The blessing of diversity: Benefits of the emancipation of Indigenous theologies in light of the emergence of World Christianity

By Jay Mātenga

Introduction: clarifying the subject

> "World Christianity" is the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel. In these societies Christianity was received and expressed through the cultures, customs, and traditions of the people affected. World Christianity... is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame.
>
> – Lamin Sanneh[1]

Together with Professor Andrew Walls, Gambian scholar Professor Lamin Sanneh could be considered a godfather of World Christianity, a maturing academic discipline that is set to disrupt the trajectory of traditional Protestant theology, which I set among global theologies as the Eurocentric theological consensus.

As a hybrid Māori/European with deep roots in Aotearoa New Zealand, I am sensitive to the need for nuance in theological and missions debates. I am concerned more for harmony than dissonance. Therefore, I prefer to identify the theological and missiological concepts still dominant in missions discourse according to their ethno/geographic source: that is, the European context, in which I include the European diaspora in North America, Latin America, Africa, India, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

[1] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 22.

Other commentators have started to favour the term "whiteness" to describe Eurocentric influences (including theological hegemony), whether inherited or adopted, but I find that it "otherises" the European schema in an unhelpful way.[2] I do, however, appreciate and identify with activists' need to call out the injustice of systems that privilege such schema and marginalise the communities for whom such authors seek equitability. There is a time to focus on systemic racial bias in the church's ecclesiological, theological and missiological discourse and praxis, and I do not want to dismiss that, but the emotion associated with racial issues as the focus of a discussion can hijack the opportunity for fruitful dialogue when the subject is not specifically about race. For this essay I want to acknowledge that issues of outright prejudice and unconscious bias exist, but they are not at the centre of this paper. Rather, I will show how a growing appreciation of theological difference, resulting from a major shift in the demographic epicentre of global Christianity,[3] has given new voices confidence to share their understanding and experience of God in Christ. Ironically, these voices are marginalised even as they are emerging from the new centre – or, more rightly, centres. The way for these voices to be better heard in the global Christian conversation has been paved by an emerging category of theological/missiological research called "World Christianity". In terms of power differentials, I see a strengthening resistance to dominant and imposed Eurocentric theological assumptions from the burgeoning alternatives. As a result, in my lifetime I expect a greater balancing of influence between the dominant (but waning)[4] Eurocentric theological consensus and the plethora of indigenous theological (re)thinking gaining acceptance out of the "Majority World". This is of significant benefit for the global church, forming a healthy "creative tension"[5] that will lead us to maturity in-Christ.[6]

What we see: clarifying our lenses

Before I continue, I must locate myself in the conversation according to the custom of my father's people…

Kō Takitimu te waka (my tribal canoe is the Takitimu). *Kō Te Waka o Kupe me Tuhirangi ngā maunga* (the mountains I belong to are known as the canoes of high chief Kupe and Tuhirangi, the sea serpent that Kupe chased along the Pacific in his discovery of Aotearoa

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[2] The term "whiteness" can be traced back to sociologist W.E.B Du Bois' 1910 essay, "The Souls of White Folk" (see: https://loa-shared.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/Du_Bois_White_Folk.pdf). Willie Jennings, among others, has adopted "whiteness" as preferred terminology, by which he means "not simply… a marker of the European but as the rarely spoken but always understood organising conceptual frame" (Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 25) and more recently, "'whiteness' does not refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making" (Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 9). Where Jennings refers to a conceptual frame and cognitive/affective structures, I prefer the more dynamic concept of schema (I also prefer schema over "world view" to describe human assumptions about ultimate reality).

[3] This reality should need no defence, but if the reader remains unsure if the majority of the world's Christian population resides outside of the West, they need only refer to the work of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. For example, see Gina Zurlo, *Global Christianity: A Guide to the World's Largest Religion from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

[4] Scott Sunquist has also produced a very accessible overview of the shift of global Christianity and the associated decline of Western theological dominance during the twentieth century. See Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2015).

[5] Creative tension is a concept also favoured by David Bosch as he comments on the missions implications of the New Testament. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

[6] I favour the hyphenated phrasing "in-Christ" as short-hand for the integrated singularity of covenantal community that Jesus established and the Apostles affirmed as the shalom kingdom of God, which the Holy Spirit manifests through allegiant followers of Jesus in the world.

New Zealand). *Kō Ruamahanga te awa* (my river is the Ruamahanga – it was in this river that I was baptised as a new believer in Christ in 1984). *Kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, kō Kai Tahu ōku iwi* (I have direct genealogical connections to these three tribes, which span the east coast of both the main islands of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ngāti Rākaiwhakairi tōku hapū* (my primary clan or family group name means to lift or hang in adornment). *Kō Kohunui tōku marae* (my clan's customary meeting place is called Kohunui – a physical piece of land on the outskirts of the village of Pirinoa, shared by our family group, with buildings for meeting/sleeping, cooking/eating, and keeping tools and supplies). *Ko Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa* (my name is Jay Mātenga), *kō Aperahama Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga tōku tupuna* (descendent of Abraham Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga). *Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa* (and so, three times respectful greetings to you all).

On my mother's side I enjoy largely English heritage traced back to the first settlers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with an Aboriginal great-great-grandmother of the the Woi-wurrung (according to family oral history) from my maternal grandmother's Australian line.

In spite of my English genetics (and Prussian via my paternal grandmother), I have come to identify as indigenous because the lens through which I see the world, understand myself and experience God is strongly influenced by an innate sensibility that resonates more with the indigenous world of Māori than the *Pākehā* (settler) context of my childhood upbringing with my English-heritage mother and stepfather. From my earliest memories I have lived with a dissonance of difference among my *Pākehā* family, friends and colleagues. Some African mentors I worked alongside in missions service were the ones God sent to help me quell the disquieting sense of being "other". Over a decade ago, during the break time of an international missions leaders meeting, Ghanaian Dr Solomon Aryeetey turned to me and asked, "Jay! You have a white face… but you have an African heart! Why is this?" I could not answer on the spot, but I have concluded that my *Moananui* (Pacific Ocean) indigenous intuition resonates on a similar frequency to that of my African continent colleagues. We share a significant overlap of values and assumptions about reality. I can, to some degree, see the world as they see the world – which results in me often empathising with and defending "Majority World" perspectives to our Western colleagues in ways that seem to help. My darker-skinned brothers suggested that my pale features aid translation. One senior American missions leader likened me to a chameleon, but I suspect he expected me to act one way (as a white person) and was surprised when I understood and supported my Indigenous brothers and sisters' perspectives in ways that our Euro-descendant, or Industrial, colleagues did not.[7] While it remains hotly debated, I have become convinced that nature (genetics) is far more influential than nurture (upbringing, lived contexts) in determining how we interpret the world around us and, therefore, who we become.

In his book *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*, American author Brad Vaughan, writing under the pseudonym Jackson Wu, takes the opposite view. Overstating the effect of external influences on the shaping of our understanding of the world, he argues that "People are not

[7] I hold to the United Nations' definition of indigenous, with a lower case i, but I capitalise it when distinguishing between Indigenous and Industrial as two distinct, global, epistemic ecosystems intersecting and overlapping on a spectrum, similar to the Collectivist and Individualist value sets continuum developed by industrial psychology researchers like Geert Hofstede. I capitalise Indigenous when referring to people who have a dominant collectivist orientation (Majority World, Global South, Developing World, etc.), and upper-case Industrial refers to those more inclined to be Individualist (Western, Modern, First World, etc.). This is a simplified explanation, but properly understood these terms helpfully enable reference to large groups of people according to shared innate values, wherever they live, more than some arbitrary geographic or economic identity. For example, "Global South" makes no sense to us who live "down under", and Majority World typically includes Latin America, which I would classify as Eurocentrically Industrial, but closer to the Indigenous end of the spectrum than, say, the English or Germans.

born with cultural perspectives. They are learned and adjusted over a lifetime. Various experiences and relationships shape one's view of the world."[8] He uses this as a central foundation to legitimise an interpretation of Romans based on his acquired understanding of East Asian ways of thinking. But at critical points it is obvious to someone from an Indigenous background that he remains constrained by his Industrial schema.

It is hubristic to suggest that you can clearly see through the cultural lens of another. You can seek to understand and appreciate, you can learn to mimic and approximate, your person can be shaped in significant ways through encounter and prolonged experience, leaving you hybridised to some degree, but you cannot become what they are and you will never see what they see because you do not have the generations of genetic coding that predisposes Indigenous people to view reality as they do (or the inverse for Indigenous in Industrial contexts). Jesus was incarnate precisely because he was born (and genetically coded) into a specific time and place. It is a grand myth of missions to think that trans-boundary ministers can do the same – known as an "incarnational" approach to ministry. It is impossible. Thinking you can or have, or expecting missionaries to do so, can lead to undue stress and significant psychosocial problems, not to mention unjust appropriation and exploitation.

What we know: clarifying theologies

The gospel can incarnate, missionaries cannot. Incarnational understandings and expressions of the faith (Christ-following covenantal communities) can, have and do emerge, but they cannot be imported, let alone imposed. A transplanted faith will not thrive for long in new soil. This is the tension emerging as Indigenous believers realise their freedom and gain confidence to express their unique values in their own voice, rooted in their assumptions about reality. The perspectives of expatriates/outsiders must submit to the right of insiders who follow "the Jesus way"[9] to guard and articulate the gospel in their midst, and their relationship with the triune God they encounter within the gospel narrative, on their own terms – all the while remaining biblically faithful and in dialogue with the global church (historic and current). This is the process of centring the local, recognising Indigenous believers as guardians of the gospel for their context,[10] and World Christianity studies are enabling this in unprecedented ways.

I deliberately ended my opening Sanneh quote where I did because he goes on to contrast World Christianity against "Global Christianity", which (in 2003) he reserved for Western-influenced theological expressions. However, as Jehu Hanciles notes, such a conceptualisation fails "to recognize that Western Christianity is itself rooted in indigenous responses".[11] This observation agrees with Stephen Bevans, who maintains that "There is no such thing as 'theology'; there is only contextual theology".[12] In other words, all (Christian) theology is rooted in and appropriate to the time and place it emerged, seeking to address questions relevant to

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[8] Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 9.

[9] This way of describing "Christianity" was popularised by the North American indigenous Christian movement and has been adopted by indigenous believers in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere as preferred terminology, thanks to the influence of NAIITS (formerly the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies), a pioneer in world Christian thinking that centres indigenous perspectives, methods and forms of theological exploration and articulation.

[10] "Guardians of the gospel" is a phrase I coined and use frequently. The first published occurrence was in an online essay for the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission in August 2020: Jay Mātenga, "Leader's Missions Forecast 2020" (21 August 2020), https://weamc.global/lb2020-2/.

[11] Jehu J. Hanciles, ed., *World Christianity: History, Methodologies, Horizons* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021), 31 (Kindle Loc. 411).

[12] Stephen B. Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology (Faith and Culture) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

that particular context, and crafted in a way that is best understood by and for its intended audience. The findings usually reveal universal realities, because theology done by Jesus followers is an exploration of the ways of a universal God. However, the conclusions may not necessarily be applicable in the same way for every context.

This principle can be difficult for Eurocentric believers to grasp, so accustomed they are to the privileges of dominance. Reformed theology is a contextual set of theological doctrines, rooted in a particular place and time, addressing particular issues. Systematic theology is a contextual theological method rooted in a particular place and time, addressing particular issues. Examples like these purport to be universal, but although many of theological findings can be adopted and adapted, others can be outright detrimental to the flourishing of the gospel in other contexts. The Eurocentric theological consensus has been privileged in most Protestant theological educational institutions around the world but when Indigenous Christians begin to decolonise their faith, such education can be found wanting.[13] Doctrinal positions and theological propositions of the Eurocentric theological consensus might be appropriate for a certain Eurocentric audience,[14] but there are myriad other ways to understand God's purposes from Scripture that are more relevant to the pressing concerns of other contexts. Such is the dynamic of a living theology. We serve a living God who is present with us in every time and place revealing to us aspects of an unchangeable loving Supreme Being in surprisingly new ways. Missions, especially, need to understand this in the new era ahead of us.

David Bosch observed the dysfunction in transcultural gospel transmission three decades ago. He supported the view that:

> We need an experimental theology in which an ongoing dialogue is taking place between text and context, a theology which, in the nature of the case, remains provisional and hypothetical.[15]

He rightly cautioned that "This should not, however, lead to an uncritical celebration of an infinite number of contextual and often mutually exclusive theologies [theological relativism]". But, he added, neither should it be restrained by an "absolutism of contextualism" where "theology, contextualised in the West, was in essence elevated to gospel status and exported to other continents as a package deal".[16] With Bosch, when I speak of the emancipation of indigenous theologies I am obviously not referring here to the dismissal of long-established tenets of our faith. Bosch maintained that we "have to affirm the universal and context-transcending dimensions of theology".[17] In other words, there are foundational axioms that are non-negotiable. There are boundaries to Christian orthodoxy, but there may not be as many non-negotiables as you might think.

I am not going to attempt to provide comparative examples here. Suffice it to say, the acknowledgement that we encounter God and understand God within certain contextual

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[13] For example, I taught a 12-session undergraduate paper called "Global Theologies" as an adjunct lecturer at New Zealand's largest Bible college, whereas Systematic Theology was a much larger course in all degree programmes at all levels simply called "Theology", with little awareness that it too was among many contextual global theologies.

[14] The new wave of former Evangelicals "deconstructing" their faith suggests that the Eurocentric theological consensus is breaking down even in the West, due to the lack of relevance to a rapidly changing context and rigid institutional commitments to increasingly outmoded theologies.

[15] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 437.

[16] Ibid., 438.

[17] Ibid.

constraints, "gospel in dialogue with culture"[18] if you will, liberates different perspectives to emerge from different contexts. As Andrew Walls attests, with reference to the cultural diversity of Christianity (and Christian thought), "The full-grown humanity of Christ requires all the Christian generations, just as it embodies all the cultural variety that six continents can bring."[19] As we hold to the integrated singularity (unity) of the diverse global body of Christ, we grow fully. We collectively mature in-Christ, manifesting "the full and complete standard of Christ" (Eph. 4:13 NLT), by learning to embrace the experience and interpretations of the biblical narrative from other contexts as gifts from above,[20] allowing them to challenge – and enlarge – our way of understanding a barely comprehensible God.

What we become: clarifying maturity

The Apostle James expresses something like this at the beginning of his epistle. In his case, the differences within the believing community were defined by economic and societal status. His audience was predominantly Jewish, as he states in his initial greeting (Jas. 1:1). Even so, he recognised that faith in Christ was a powerfully reconciling faith, able to bring together disparate parts of a believing community, which, for James, were poor and rich Jews. Paul develops this further with his Jew/Gentile teaching, but in arguably the earliest epistle written after the Resurrection, James already understood the power of sitting in the tensions of difference to mature us in-Christ. To read this in James you need to appreciate that the epistle is written to address issues *within* the fellowship(s), not to provide comfort from outside persecutors such as Peter's epistles do. Keep that in mind as you read…

> Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. (Jas. 1:2–4. NLT)

The great joy to which James refers is a vision of maturity (perfect and complete) in-Christ. This maturity should be the highest aim for followers of the Jesus way. It is a process otherwise known as discipleship. Community is the crucible that forges it, eternal reward is promised as a result of it, and it comes from holding fast to the faith over time (patient endurance, perseverance), allowing troubles to work a transformative miracle in each of us. The faith is in Christ's ability, by the power of the Spirit, to form a covenantal community that witnesses to the reality of the (now/not yet) shalom kingdom of God. Furthermore, the troubles/testing emerge from within "the fellowship of difference and differents", as Scot McKnight calls it: "a mixture of people from all across the map and spectrum: men and women, rich and poor. It is a mix of races and ethnicities."[21] While James specifically addresses a monocultural expression of our faith at the time (diaspora Jews), they still had differences to address, hence the reason for his letter. He masterfully prefaces his address by highlighting the transformative action of the Spirit to mature us into Christ's likeness,[22] as individuals and

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[18] Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), xvii. This is also the intent of Shoki Coe, who coined the term "contextualisation". See Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology" in *Mission Trends No.3: Third World Theologies*, eds. G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1976).

[19] Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvii.

20 In keeping with the Ephesians passage, we could argue that these gifts are provided to the global church via apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd-teachers from other contexts – elders from indigenous theological perspectives.

[21] Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 16.

[22] James does not specifically reference the Holy Spirit, but from the New Testament as a whole we can safely identify the necessary Agent of the transformative process.

as a group, as we are troubled by the expectations, preferences, privileges and behaviours of others within the fellowship, and as we trouble them in return.[23] In my faith background, we used to call this "sandpaper ministry".

Endurance is the New Living Translation version's interpretation of patient steadfastness, not wavering in our trust in Jesus because of the differences we experience with one another. If we hold fast, James suggests that we are positively changed (matured/perfected) by those troubling differences. Paul indicates a similar thing in Rom. 12:1–2 where he encourages us to be transformed (metamorphosised) by the renewing of our mind. How? Through our quiet times, Bible studies, prayer and corporate liturgies? No. While good and healthy and important, they are not the acceptable worship to which Paul refers. In the wider context of Rom. 12 (and the entire arc of the epistle and elsewhere in Paul's writing), being a living sacrifice is the "kenotic" self-giving of ourselves to one another in covenantal community as the body of Christ.[24] It is through our interactions within the fellowship of male, female, eunuch, Jew, Greek, Barbarian, slave, free, rich, poor, young, old, etc. that we are transformed by our learning from one another, and making space for each other, empowered by the Spirit who is love. This kind of harmony-in-tension is non-conformance with the customs of this world, which loves to distinguish and separate "their kind" from "our kind".

Modern science is providing us with confirmation of this ancient Christian assumption. Recent work in the area of interpersonal neurobiology is proving that we are who we are because of our social interactions.[25] Our genetics determine how we process the data that our brains/psyche receives from interpersonal stimulus, but the stimulus itself prompts the creation of the very synaptic pathways that make us uniquely who we become in the world. The wider our interactions, the richer our understanding of reality. So, ipso facto, homogeneity or socialising only with those like us who like us ultimately stunts our growth. In my reading of Scripture, through an indigenous lens assisted by World Christian studies, homogenous fellowship develops immature Christians.[26]

Returning to Rom. 12, only by dwelling together in the tensions of difference will we comprehend God's good, pleasing and perfect will – which, as Jesus stated clearly in his John 17 prayer, is that we become an integrated singularity.[27] One of the biggest hindrances on our pathway to the kind of maturity that should bring us great joy is our assumption that unity should be on our terms – if only everyone aligned with our view, the church will finally be unified. In my experience, that is the evangelical pipe dream. Meanwhile, myriad denominations and ministries wrestle for dominance of and acquiescence to their perspective as the benchmark for unity. That is not what Jesus prayed for, but neither did he pray for the "live and let live" kind. I see this particularly in the ecumenical movement, where everyone is free and encouraged to express their faith on their own terms, and indigenous communities can thrive in such a context. Yet there seems to be little serious dialogue on points of

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[23] I extrapolate this from the rest of the letter, where James speaks specifically to the tension points in the fellowship: selfish desires, anger, judgementalism, hate speech, gossip, hypocrisy, prejudice (rich versus poor), laziness, jealousy and compromise, among other things!

[24] The best example of kenosis (self-emptying/giving up/giving way) is found in Phil. 2:3–11.

[25] If you wish to follow this "rabbit trail", begin with Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010). Then dive deeper into the work of Dan Siegel, for example: Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

[26] I do not speak here of cultural homogeneity, but of the tendency to fellowship only with those with whom we have a strong affinity. Obviously, within the same culture there are plenty of differences – as James attests.

[27] "… that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you" (John 17:21, NLT).

theological difference, let alone significant transformation from prolonged engagement in such tensions. Consensus can be gained on the core elements of orthodox Christian faith, and on certain social or political matters, but it is, by and large, each to their own doctrinally and theologically. While these generalisations are far too simplistic, in both the evangelical and ecumenical expressions, the Protestant Church remains largely buffered from difference. We pay little more than lip service to the kind of integrated singularity meant by Jesus when he asked the Holy Parent to make us one,[28] so that the glory of God (the manifestation of the Spirit, by trinitarian interpretation) might be revealed and cause the world to believe (consider credible) and know (experience) that the Ancient of Days lovingly sent the unbegotten Son.

But there is an alternative to the seeking of dominance or live/let live options. It is expressed throughout the New Testament (for those with eyes to see) and it is to simply live in the tensions of difference, holding fast to God in faithful loving relationships, seeking to understand one another's experience and understanding of God, as uncomfortable as those alternative perspectives might be to our current convictions and knowledge of God. Just as you cannot create harmony in nature without tension,[29] the shalom harmony of the kingdom cannot emerge without tension – the new creation is co-created by us all, in creative tension.

How did I come to see Scripture in this way? I did not learn it from my theological and missions studies, although what I did learn there has given me language to articulate my findings. At one level I intuited them from my own reading and thinking over the years, in dialogue with missions colleagues from the Majority World, but the framework for understanding Scripture and the purpose of God as a pursuit of integrated relational harmony (relationship in tuned tension) comes from an exploration of my indigeneity, seeking to understand myself – and, in doing so, asking highly contextualised questions of God in dialogue with *te ao Māori* (the Māori reality).

What we believe: clarifying ultimate reality

Justice activist and pastor Tim Ahrens quotes theologian Robert McAfee Brown, who reminded his audience at Macalester College in 1980 that "1) where you stand will determine what you will see; 2) whom you stand with will determine what you hear; and 3) what you see and hear will determine what you say and how you act".[30] This reads like a truism but it is only when you are exposed to a perspective different from your own that you realise that what you considered to be common sense or patently obvious is not so common or obvious to others – and, in fact, your view is probably a blinkered one. Proximity to difference makes a difference. The rupturing of our core assumptions can lead to maturity if we allow it to, taking the time to understand another perspective.

In contrast to the deep assumptions of Industrial ways of knowing, which are rooted in cartesian dualism and the subsequent Enlightenment, a traditional Māori schema, or understanding of reality, is fully integrated or holistic, without any of the separation of spiritual

[28] *Te reo Māori* (the Māori language) does not typically have gendered pronouns for parents – *matua* can mean either father or mother. For example, the Lord's prayer starts with *E te matou Matua e te rangi* (Our Parent in the highest place).

[29] I play guitar, so take for example an instrument string. You cannot strike a harmonic on an instrument string without it being under tension – and tuned tension at that. Similarly, our vocal cords need to be under tension for us to speak or sing. There is a resonant tension in all of creation. Even stones vibrate at different frequencies, which requires tension to create.

[30] Tim Ahrens, "Where You Stand Determines What You See" in *Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry from Yale Divinity School* (Spring 2012), https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/where-you-stand-determines-what-you-see (accessed 20 March 2023).

and material assumed in the Industrial world.[31] In *te ao Māori*, everything is interconnected, and the influence or action by one element is felt throughout the whole system. Nothing is autonomous and no aspect can be definitively examined without reference to the whole. New generations emerge from combinations formed by previous generations, like children from parents. They are not products but the latest iterations of a process. This is, in short, the paradigm of *whakapapa* (genealogy, heritage or lineage), which guides Māori in our understanding of the way the world is designed to work. Everything, everywhere, all at once,[32] is woven together.

Māori *tohunga* (spiritual authority) and Anglican priest Revd Māori Marsden provides us with insight into the deep assumptions about reality from *te ao Māori*. The traditional Māori understanding of reality might best be described in English as a woven universe,

> a fabric comprising of a fabulous mélange of energies.... It was the preoccupation of the *whare wānanga* [centre of Māori scholarship and learning] to view the world as a music, a singing, as "rhythmical patterns of pure energy" that are woven and move with cosmological purpose and design. Our concern, therefore, should be to pay attention to how this fabric is woven and the nature of our place within it... The universe itself is a process or event within the cosmic process by which Io orders creation.[33]

Io in most Māori (and wider Moananui) traditions is legitimately associated with the God of the Bible, the Great Creator. Descriptions of Io's character are biblically resonant, and our indigenous Io narrative adds a depth of understanding that Scripture omits in its brief accounts of creation. Anyone familiar with Tolkien's creation narrative in *The Silmarillion* will recognise a similar concept of the universe being sung into being.[34] John's account is also wonderfully resonant in concert with Genesis, where together we see that the Divine Thought or Consciousness (Logos) uttered life and light into being and sustains it still. From Paul's majestic hymn in Colossians (1:15ff) we understand that Jesus the Christ is that Divine Consciousness incarnate, and there we see that Jesus holds everything together still. Industrials conveniently sidestep this concept. They are not quite sure what to do with it. They have dismissed what Māori instinctively know to be true – the "energies" spoken of by Revd Marsden are the life-force of the Creator sustaining the world, and we who live in it.

Where you stand determines what you see. When I speak of this to Industrial believers, especially in missions, I am often confronted with accusations of animism (and, by implication, syncretism). Accusers usually have little understanding that the concept arose out of the early pursuit of evolutionary biology. It is a construct that imposed a hierarchy of religious order upon the world – with rational Western theology conveniently in the supreme position (but

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[31] The separation of spirit and matter is rooted in ancient Greek philosophies. Descartes' philosophies were focused on the distinction between mind and matter, somewhat different. But he is credited with laying the foundations for what became Enlightenment rationalism, and subsequent "disenchantment" that relegated the spiritual realm to that of fantasy, which has dominated Western thought (and theologies) for over 400 years. For an introduction to Descartes, see: Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 188–91. For more on the disenchantment of Western reality see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[32] Here I obviously borrow the title of the popular 2023 Academy Award-winning movie with East Asian perspectives. For Indigenous, even past and future are perceived as belonging to the perpetual present. "Ka mua, ka muri" is a well-known proverb that means we walk confidently into the future while facing the past. Unfortunately, Andrew Walls appropriates this concept incorrectly in the "What of the Future" section of chapter 5 of Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

[33] Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden* (Masterton, NZ: The estate of Rev. Māori Marsden, 2003), xiii–xiv.

[34] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: Harper Collins, 1977).

since dethroned by atheistic humanitarian secularism).[35] Acknowledging life force, emanating from an immanent God, as the very fabric of the universe, need not mean worship of the force, as implied by those who would cry "animism!" Neither does an active relationship with the created order need to imply worship, any more than does a relationship with our pets. However, dismissing the life force that most of the world outside of Industrial influence accepts in various ways is a dangerous place to stand, and we are now reaping the whirlwind of sowing such a position because of the Industrial overreach that fails to recognise the gift that God has provided for us in creation, as an extension of God's self.

Who you stand with will determine what you understand and do. When we join with those who recognise this gift of life, honouring the Source as revealed in Scripture, all manner of theological possibilities emerge with the potential to change the way we behave. The *tohunga* (Māori scholar priests) knew and understood "the power of relationships as the essential nature of all reality".[36] In *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), the art of crafting/weaving relationships is known as *whakawhanaungatanga*. All Māori social concepts develop from understanding reality as the flow of life force/energy through the processes of *whanaungatanga* (weaving relationships) and *whakapapa* (to create new generations of the eternal process). As a brief example, in *te ao Māori*, all things consist of *mauri* (the life-force principle). When *mauri* is animated or given active life (by the *ha* or breath of the Great Spirit) it becomes *mauri ora* (living energy, with certain agency). When *mauri ora* is recognised by humans, it is attributed as *mana* (the positive attributes of living things, although *mana* can also be attributed to inanimate objects as well). *Mana* is to Māori something akin to social currency. So, a key objective of an individual (if brought up well) is to increase their *mana* through the right application of their personality, gifts, skills, talents, etc. for the flourishing of the community and thereby add to the *mana* of their people. *Mana* cannot be claimed for oneself, only given by the community – usually in subtle ways according to the customs of the people. It can be leveraged to bring positive influence, and it can be lost if one acts in a way that diminishes the community, with social consequences for the person and those associated with him or her.[37] Aside from death, excommunication would be one of the most extreme consequences because without community recognition you lose your *mana*, and risk becoming a non-person.

Therefore, similar to other Indigenous ways of knowing and practicing healthy community around the world, Māori strive for harmonious relationships, with high tolerance for tension in the process of forging and being forged by relationships with others. We are obligated to work for the flourishing of relationships, for in addition to the benefits for our groups it also works for the benefit of us as individuals, increasing our *mana* and therefore our influence in the community (but always for the community's benefit, not our own) – not just for today but for future generations and the honour of our ancestors. As I exhibit in conclusion, the weaving of relationships, and repairing of torn weaves, is a spiritually charged process.

[35] I develop this further, albeit briefly, in a blog post here: "Confronting Animism" (7 June 2019), https://jaymatenga.com/animism/.

[36] Royal, *The Woven Universe*, xiv.

[37] To widely read missions thinkers: beware that I am not talking about honour/shame here. Take care not to overlay trite and outdated Industrial concepts on the sacred reality of Indigenous people. It is a much deeper and more spiritual process than any outsider can comprehend. The artificial honour/shame et al. constructs in current missions thinking are not helpful in allowing Indigenous theologies to be articulated on their own terms (without having to reference borrowed concepts).

Conclusion: clarifying our future

My aim for this essay was to explain how studies in World Christianity have created freedom for Indigenous theologies to participate more effectively in global church conversations about our understanding of God, the Parent, Son and Spirit. It is not an essay about race, but it does recognise that Indigenous theologies have been silenced by the dominant Industrial voice in the global church conversation until recently. Researchers in the study of World Christianity (historic and current) have exposed this.

I located myself and explained why location is significant. It is important to humbly acknowledge who we are, where we come from and the limits of our ability to understand others. After all, Jesus did. It was only because he knew he was "in very nature God"[38] that he could give of himself (kenosis) and become a servant, which resulted in his full status (ascendence to complete authority). So too, the Apostles teach us, our discipleship is a process of transformative kenosis in our relationships with one another in-Christ. This is for our great benefit, our joy, and embracing Indigenous theologies can increase that benefit if we choose to prioritise healthy relationship-making as God's ultimate purpose for humanity. For Māori, the very act of perpetual reconciliation, required for enduring relationships, repairs tears in the woven universe, with every participant in the integrated whole seen and given honour for who/what God has made them to be and become – co-creating a new creation, the shalom Kingdom of God.

Māori see the universe as a weave resonating under constant tension, for only therein can we produce harmony – an equal influence of unique contributions added in appropriate measure, like ingredients in a recipe. Recalling a conversation that global Christianity demographer Todd Johnson had with a senior Ghanaian church leader, peacemaker Uchenna Anyanwu notes that Indigenous followers of the Jesus way deserve "an invitation to the kitchen of global Christianity, not just to its table".[39] Being entrusted with access to the kitchen, bringing theological ingredients harvested from their garden-walk with God, alongside ingredients contributed by followers from a diverse range of contexts, provides space for a wonderfully unique co-creation. Not autonomous creation in separate parts of the kitchen, not piecemeal selection of ingredients to subtly flavour an otherwise preset recipe, but an all-embracing fusion of full flavours – a meal of all peoples for all people. I can imagine this being served at the banquet Jesus hosts for us, who have been brought in from the highways and the byways.

Keeping with the cooking metaphor, I close with a reflection from Māori Christian elder and veteran missionary Arthur Baker,[40] one of my doctoral research respondents, who reflected on the process of developing relationships and observed:

> You know, (referring to [the stew] pot [on the stove]) all the components put together make the whole. Leave the doughboys [dumplings] out of the boil-up and you don't know what you are talking about, it isn't even a boil-up bro. Don't pour that fat out of the water, I don't care what the doctor said, you've got to let that meat cook in that oil, a bit of mutton brisket and whatever. Let that grease go through the *puha* (watercress) and have those Dakota Reds or Rua (potatoes) because they are firm, and

[38] Phil. 2:6, NIV.

[39] Uchenna D. Anyanwu, "Invitation to the Kitchen, Not Just to the Table: Todd M. Johnson's Motif of Global Christianity," in *Portraits of Global Christianity: Research and Reflections in Honor of Todd M. Johnson*, ed. Gina A. Zurlo (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2023), 49.

[40] All of the respondents to my doctoral research permitted their names to be known. The knowledge I was gifted belongs to them and they deserve the honour of acknowledgement as the source of treasures such as the quote from *kaumatua* (elder) Arthur.

> they are good for the third or fourth boil-up. That's the boil-up in its essence. You can't take anything away from it otherwise its only in part. You can't have it in part, this thing is the whole thing, you know? You have the action of the *rewena* (yeast, fermentation) amongst all those that are gathered here. And the *whanau* (relationship) thing begins to activate, and it permeates the whole. It's a spiritual thing, you know? This principle, it's spiritual.[41]

When the heat comes on, rejoice! Stay in the pot and be transformed.

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41 Jay Mātenga, "Mutuality of Belonging: Toward Harmonizing Culturally Diverse Missions Groups" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017), 133.

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