

Indigenous Epistemologies: Connecting with Christ and Creation

By Jay Matenga

Prelude

Kia ora (a greeting of life blessing)! Māori custom compels me to locate myself as an indigenous¹ person... *Kō Takitimu te waka* (my tribal canoe is the Takitimu). *Kō Te Waka o Kupe me Tuhirangi ngā maunga* (my mountains 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 New Zealand). *Kō Ruamahanga te awa* (my river is the Ruamahanga—it was in this river that I was baptized as a new believer in Christ in 1984). *Kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, kō Kai Tahu ōku iwi* (I have birth heritage connections to these three tribes which span the East Coast of the North Island and the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ngāti Rākaiwhakairi tōku hapū* (my primary clan or family group name means to lift up 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, with buildings for meeting/sleeping, cooking/eating, and keeping tools and supplies). *Ko Jay Matenga tōku ingoa* (my name is Jay Mātenga), *kō Aperahama Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga tōku tupuna* (descendent of Abraham Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga). *Nō reira*, And therefore... *raranga katoa* (it is all woven together).

The Emergence of Difference

The intellectual movement that emerged in Western Europe in the seventeenth century, commonly known as the Enlightenment, had a defining influence on Protestant Christianity. It changed the rules of the game, especially regarding how theological thought was structured, what was chosen for theological investigation, and what was determined to be normative and non-negotiable. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy explains that the term “‘Enlightenment’ contrasts with the darkness of *irrationality and superstition*... Kant... said that enlightenment is the ‘emergence of man from his self-imposed *infancy*...’”² Alternative rationalities or integrated epistemologies (systematic ways of knowing) unfamiliar to Western Europeans was considered inferior. As suggested by Kant's comment, anything that was not normative for the West was perceived to be ‘less-than’, and this sense of superiority, soon to be backed by the technology and power of the Industrial Revolution, went unquestioned by Western European explorers, traders, colonizers, academics, theologians, and missionaries—until recently.

It is easy to underestimate the influence of philosophical thinking on our lived reality, but it is impossible to overstate it. Over time, what Thomas Kuhn identified as a revolutionary

¹ In this paper I will be using “indigenous” in two ways. First, the United Nations definition of an indigenous person (United Nations, 2004) and then a broader application that includes people from collectivist cultural backgrounds, for which I capitalize “Indigenous”. I contrast “Indigenous” with “Industrial”, referring to people from individualist cultural backgrounds, usually, but not exclusively, Westerners. In this way I prefer a values-based to economic or geographic categorizations. Individualist/Collectivist (Industrial/Indigenous) are two of the most dominant value determiners for the people of the world today, sitting as two poles of a spectrum.

² Honderich, Ted, ed. 1995. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

restructuring of ideas, or “paradigm shift”³, permeates a culture and a new understanding of lived reality is normalized such that it ceases to be questioned. That is, until circumstances prompt new questions—prompting the next revolution of ideas. We are living at the conclusion of a shift away from the Enlightenment towards something new, generated by questions arising out of the very globalized reality that the spread of the European diaspora and global trade created. From early in the twentieth century, amplified by the second world war, the central question that emerged among those concerned about international relationships and global stability is something like, “how can we all get along?” The efficacy of geopolitics, economics, science, and religion are rightly assessed by the degree to which they can provide solutions to this question, or at least some interim stability. We are living in an era where former solutions are failing, with divisions increasing—a threshold between times.

Exposure to difference had a reverse effect on European realities. The development of Evangelicalism over the past two centuries, was defined in a large part by global, more than local, realities. Information about new worlds and people from those new worlds exposed Europeans to ways of living that differed markedly from that of the tribes of the European continent and British Isles. Explorers and traders were initial sources of such information, but from the late 1700’s influence would come from colonizers and missionaries. As colonies established, missionaries followed. Where missionaries went, the gospel was seeded into new soil. While local theological interpretations were sternly resisted by missionary and denominational authorities, the expression of our faith that flourished in new places was a highly indigenized one, rooted in and affected by the context. As Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim attest,

“socio-politically, the worldwide presence of Christianity today is not primarily the result of attempts by powerful churches to replicate themselves worldwide but the result of indigenous response and grassroots movements.”⁴

The Emancipation of Theology

Theological thought cannot be easily constrained. Denominational leaders may try to dictate what is considered theologically orthodox for their congregants, but biblically faithful expressions of our faith that endure emerge from lived realities of Jesus’ followers, and questions resulting from their experiences—current and historic. To borrow the framing of Bevans and Schroeder⁵, valid Christian theology develops around core thematic constants in dialogue with a context. Bevans and Schroeder identify six thematic theological constants: christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, soteriology, anthropology, and culture.

As local churches mature, confidence grows generation by generation. Much older Christian movements, like the historic Eastern and Western orthodoxies and their spin-offs, hold to theological thought developed over centuries. In the face of Enlightenment critique, Western theologies became more systematized, with passionate concern for defending the faith against scientific critique. This context shaped its articulation of the constants. Together

³ Kuhn, Thomas S. 2012. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Fourth Edition)*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Kim, Sebastian and Kim, Kirsteen. 2016. *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction (2nd edition)*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁵ Bevans, Stephen B. and Schroeder, Roger. 2004. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

with strengthening theological developments in the United States of America, this context nurtured the modern missionary movement. Theological developments became dogma. Biblical interpretations became doctrine. But theology imposed upon another context, regardless of dogma, doctrine, edict, or decree, will not flourish if it does not address the ancient and new questions relevant to each context. This holds true as much in the shifting contexts of Western Christendom (where the faith is rapidly waning) as it does in the contexts of cross-cultural missions. Crises and questions in context must be addressed in biblically faithful ways according to the assumptions of a given context—in conversation with historic Christian perspectives and the global Church but guided and governed locally.

The relatively recent discipline of World Christianity reveals how a truly global Christianity is maturing, with indigenous theologies gaining validity. As more work is published, theologies from the Majority World are reaching a broader audience and their credibility is growing with it. A strengthening confidence from Majority World theologians, attuned to the questions of their own contexts, and the inability of Western theology to stem attrition from the faith within its own contexts, are among the reasons why the Eurocentric theological consensus is losing its authority as the arbiter of orthodoxy for the Protestant world. Theology is emancipated from Western constraints. Commentators observe that we are living in an increasingly polycentric global reality but, as Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim are careful to point out⁶, this has been our Christian reality since the first century.

My reason for noting this shift from a Western dominance to a more decentralized, diverse, and dispersed World Christianity is to establish legitimacy for the theological reality I will present. It is a sad academic fact that we are forced to paint Indigenous theologies onto the canvas of established Industrial⁷ norms, but this is a relationship Indigenous theologians must accept while Industrial theology remains dominant in Evangelical thought. However, while Indigenous theologies need to dialogue with the Industrial theological establishment, they need not be defined by or restricted to those norms. Our contexts are different, our ancient questions are different, our reading of the unchangeable and authoritative Scripture is different. Our conclusions will be different—more relevant for our contexts. We do not intend to diminish Industrial theological axioms. Rather, we leave it to their theologians to critically assess their assumptions for their own context. We only ask that those propositions not be imposed upon our experience of God in Christ, and how we interpret those experiences by what find in the Bible.

Seeing Through Different Eyes

The emancipation of theology from Eurocentric constraints is gaining momentum, supported by books exploring alternative hermeneutics or ways of reading Scripture, while remaining faithful to the narrative of the holy text. Many are written by Westerners, trained in Western theology seeking to defend alternative interpretations discovered during their intercultural encounters in cultures foreign to them. As helpful as this is, we must treat the ‘outsider’ perspective cautiously. There is a dimension to interpretation within Indigenous cultures that can only be accessed by blood—by genetic heritage.

In his treatment of *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*, the Western author who uses the pseudonym ‘Jackson Wu’ claims,

⁶ See footnote 4.

⁷ See footnote 1 for explanation of my use of Industrial and Indigenous.

“To say Westerners cannot have an Eastern perspective effectively nullifies all biblical interpretation... People are not born with cultural perspectives. They are learned and adjusted over a lifetime. Various experiences and relationships shape one’s view of the world.”⁸

It is indeed legitimate for ‘outsiders’ to learn to interpret well, so long as they humbly recognize their limitations. But to defend his claim, Wu appeals to the contested ‘nurture over nature’ thesis, which recent scientific research finds wanting. Instead, researchers are finding that our genetic code carries cultural information. Innate cultural preferences can be altered by life in a very different context from our heritage, but we too easily underestimate how much of our interpretation of lived experience is intuited from inherited coding. Therefore, Wu cannot provide a fully Eastern perspective since he was not born Asian, he will never be Asian, and his perspective will only at best approximate an Asian one. To suggest otherwise is appropriation. This is evident in my Indigenous reading of his work.

For example, he makes much of the term ‘honor and shame’. This reveals the dependence of Industrial intercultural commentators on Industrial assumptions. The term, its derivatives, and the psychology built upon them is rooted in largely dismissed early 20th Century North American anthropology, yet intercultural academics and missions practitioners persist with its use. For the Indigenous, building honor is a great motivator, and defense of honor is as paramount as the protection of one’s financial wealth is for Industrials. Shame is a different category altogether. One must inherit the ability to understand cultural concepts like this at a deep, visceral level. Contrary to popular belief, it is not something that can simply be acquired through purely cognitive means over time.

Another anthropological concept misappropriated by theologians, missionaries, and intercultural researchers, is that categorized as ‘animism’, the belief in a vital life-force permeating and sustaining the material world. Use of the term infers the rejection of life-force as a legitimate prime assumption, with those who hold to this belief being treated as underdeveloped humans. Disparagingly, CMS Missionary William Gairdner, defined animism as “the religious beliefs of more or less backward or degraded peoples all over the world.”⁹ Yet, when one considers how pervasive a belief in a vital life-force is around the world,¹⁰ the Industrial perspective is the aberrant one. Industrial arrogance places itself in the superior position, and the dismissal of life-force is proving a significant downfall. We only need to look at the damage industrialization has done to our environments or the mental health crises confronting Industrial societies to perceive correlated effects.

Philosopher, Charles Taylor¹¹ addresses this as the disenchantment of Industrial¹² society and suggests a need for re-enchantment. Taylor observes that Industrials experience the world as individuals buffered, or closed off, to influence from the outside. In contrast, he suggests, we are better off experiencing life as porous, allowing and engaging with outside

⁸ Wu, Jackson. 2019. *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul’s Message and Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

⁹ Chidester, David. 2014. *Empire of Religion: Imperialism & Comparative Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ This reality is described in many ways, like Qi (Chinese), Ki (Japanese), Prāna (Hindu), Vijñāna (Buddhist), Ruach/Spirit (Judeo-Christian), Barakah (Islam), Ntu (Bantu), Manitou (Algonquian), Ní (Lakota), Nilch’I (Navajo), Bio-Plasmic Energy (Euro-Russian), Mana (Melanesian), or for New Zealand Māori, we call it Mauri Ora.

¹¹ Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press.

¹² Again, Industrial is my way of describing people from individualistic/Western cultural backgrounds, it is not Taylor’s.

influences, including spiritual ones. The functional deism of Industrial Christianity has done the world a great disservice.

Making The Creation Connections

An Indigenous perspective in contrast, is porous. It invites and engages in relationships with reality outside of itself. There are many commonalities in the value systems of the collectivist cultures I group together as Indigenous, even if they are not technically classifiable as indigenous peoples. I cannot authoritatively speak on behalf of all, but I can fairly represent my people for illustrative purposes, as an example of how indigenous views interpret reality and the impact that has on our theology of creation—and our missions.

Māori Anglican theologian and *tohunga* (traditional spiritual expert), Rev Māori Marsden introduces our ‘first principles’ this way,

Ultimate reality is *wairua* or spirit. The universe is process. The Creator or first cause, *Io Taketake* (the ancient one) is the genesis of the cosmic process. Spirit is ubiquitous, immanent in the total process; upholding, sustaining, replenishing, regenerating all things by its *hau* or *mauri*—the Breath of Life-principle (or vital life force). As a corollary of (all of this, therefore), All is One and interlocked together.

(Humanity) is both human and divine, an integral part, both of the cosmic process and the natural order. The Māori approach to life is holistic. There is no sharp division between culture, society and their institutions.¹³ (Marsden and Royal 2003, 33)

From *mauri* (vital life force) comes *mauri ora* (activated life force) that animates all living things. This manifests as *mana* (personality, character, power, authority), which is honored as it is recognized by others. Mana is relational currency and highly prized. It is increased by giving it away. Mana grows when invested in relationships, through generosity, use of skill, application of wisdom, contributions to society. Mana is also an attribute of the non-human world, spiritual and physical. Created order has mana according to its kind. It is to be respected, honored for its contribution to life and wellbeing, and related to with care.

For biblically faithful Christ-followers, this perspective opens up a world of understanding about God and creation, connecting Christ with creation as “supreme over all creation”, through whom “God created everything” and who “holds all creation together” (Colossians 1:15, 16, 17). This passage is too easily interpreted metaphorically when, for indigenous cultures like mine, they are quite literal. A biblically faithful reinterpretation of my culture’s first-principles sees *Io* the uncreated One as the God of the Bible, *hau/mauri* in the Genesis account of creation and especially in Genesis 2:7 where *mauri ora*, the breath of God, activates life in humankind. For those with eyes to see, evidence of God’s vital life-force in all of creation permeates the whole of Scripture. When we read passages like Job 12:7-10 we do not doubt the interconnected, interactive relationship expressed there. Again, it is not metaphorical. We enjoy a deeply intimate relationship with our habitats. We are connected to creation and perceive our transcendent God immanent there, not absent from it. Any theology that thinks sin can separate God from creation fails to appreciate the sovereignty of God and the overwhelming evidence to the contrary in Scripture.

When Industrial Christians repudiate animism, they associate it pantheism (worship of terrestrial-inhabiting spiritual beings), but an intimate relationship with creation need not infer

¹³ Marsden, Māori, and Royal, Te Ahukaramu Charles. 2003. *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*. Otaki, NZ: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden.

worship. Worship requires a level of allegiance where the worshipper becomes subordinate to and in some ways controlled (constrained or compelled) by the object being worshipped, seeking that object to work supernaturally on the worshipper's behalf. All Christ-followers must renounce idolatry and witchcraft and find such things reprehensible. But spiritual beings do not just cease to be. Rather, because we follow Christ, we no longer need to fear, nor try to manipulate, spiritual beings for our own gain. They are to be acknowledged, respected, and mostly ignored, unless terrestrial spirits interfere with human wellbeing.

For Māori, humans are subordinate to creation in the sense that we are heavily dependent upon it for our survival. We carry a responsibility to care for creation, not because we inherit it from our forebears but because we are borrowing it from our children's children. A popular way for Māori to encapsulate our innate sense of responsibility for creation is the term *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship, protection, security, nurture). Selby et al explain that, "Kaitiakitanga is not an obligation which we choose to adopt or ignore; it is an inherited commitment that links... the spiritual realm with the human world and both of those with the earth and all that is on it"¹⁴ With animist fears firmly set aside, this could be deemed an act of worship of the Creator in the sense that we are serving God by ensuring we nurture that which God determined to be "good" and actively sustains. The alternative is damning. The last stanza of the twenty-four elders' song in Revelation 11:18 should shake us all to the core.

Conclusion

Whenua, the Māori word for our environment, is the same word we use for the placenta. The concept is identical—a place that sustains us, feeds us, provides oxygen and nutrients for our bodies. Whenua is a gift from the Creator—Parent¹⁵, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our habitat is our context, which has been torn apart by the influence of Sin, evidenced by broken relationships. Through Christ's redeeming work on the cross, those of us who follow Him have Holy Spirit power that enables us to overcome Sin's influence and live in perpetually reconciled relationships, saving the rent universe one relationship at a time, including our relationship with creation. We are saved into a covenantal community in-Christ, to live in Holy Spirit-enabled shalom harmony, transformed by learning to live and love in relationships that prioritize kenotic mutuality and reciprocity. All the while, we long for the day when Sin will be no more, relationships will be fully repaired, and creation will cease its groaning and reveal the full glory of God unveiled. These are theological constants worked out in our context, and they resonate with many other decolonized indigenous Christ-following theologies.

Raranga katoa (it is all woven together). Until we accept once more the immanence of God—Parent, Son, and Spirit—with creation (which includes all humanity), indivisibly interconnected, we will continue to apply utilitarian values to our treatment of creation. No ecotheology, decolonized or otherwise, can be theologically and practically effectual unless we acknowledge God's involvement. If we truly understood God's grace in sustaining the world with vital life-force, we would treat the material world with much more care. May our merciful and loving Lord enlighten us all.

¹⁴ Selby, Rachael; Moore, Pātaka; and Mulholland, Malcolm, *Māori and the Environment: Kaitiaki*. Wellington, NZ: Huia Publishers.

¹⁵ Most Māori proper nouns are non-gendered, especially for elder relations (parents, uncles/aunts, etc.)

Discussion Questions:

1. “The Eurocentric theological consensus is losing its authority as the arbiter of orthodoxy for the Protestant world” means that Western theologies are not as universally orthodox as we might think. How does this cause you to react? What implications might this have for your ministry and future theological development?
2. Take some time to consider your first-principle or world view assumptions. In cross-cultural contexts it does not take long to discover our assumptions might not be as universal as we might think. In what ways does exposure to a Māori cosmology confirm or challenge your understanding of reality?
3. Do you tend to be ‘buffered’ or ‘porous’, closed off or open to spiritual and supernatural phenomena? How might becoming more porous, more open and connected, but also more vulnerable to the spiritual dimensions of reality, change your relationship with our Lord and Christ Jesus?
4. What are some key hurdles that keep you from accepting the immanence of God in creation? How might accepting it change your relationship with creation?
5. Discuss your thoughts about worshipping God amid creation (in open nature) and the possibility of worshipping God by caring for creation.