



Intercultural Hybridity

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In a world of different perceptions of reality, how can we work towards harmony? Jay looks at this question from a perspective of knowing and being known. He argues that intercultural hybridity should be viewed as a desirable and beneficial outcome of living in the tension of difference. As Christ-followers focus on reconciliation and resolution in diverse relationships, Jay posits that the outcome approaches the shalom unity that Jesus prayed for.

Kia tau te aroha noa ki a koutou me te rangimarie, he mea na te Atua na to mātou Matua, na te Ariki hoki, na Ihu Karaiti. (Grace and peace to you [all] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ). Tihei Māori ora! Mā te rongō, ka mōhio; mā te mōhio, ka mārama; mā te mārama, ka mātau; mā te mātau, ka ora. (Through perception comes recognition; through recognition comes clarity; through clarity comes understanding; through understanding comes life and wellbeing).

Knowing

How do we know? It seems such a common-sense thing that we know stuff. It is intuitive. We cannot remember a time when we did not know anything. We can conceive of once having to learn because we see babies doing it, but it is rare to recall the conscious commencement of our engagement with the world around us.

Furthermore, how do we know what we know? Cognitive scientists, Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, in *The Knowledge Illusion*, argue that human beings notoriously overestimate how much we know. Their basic thesis is that we live in knowledge communities, interdependently reliant on something like a hive mind but we rarely give credence to it. They believe that,

The nature of thought is to seamlessly draw on knowledge wherever it can be found, inside and outside of our own heads. We live under the knowledge illusion because we fail to draw an accurate line between what is inside and outside our heads. (*The Knowledge Illusion*)

Drawing on the work of psychiatry expert Dan Siegel, Curt Thompson agrees that knowing is a communal phenomenon. Furthermore, that being known, a relational or social interaction, is a critical part of our psycho-spiritual wellbeing, which directly affects our cognitive and physical states.

In *Anatomy of the Soul* Thompson argues that, left to our own volition, our minds tend to want to disconnect—to hide and defend, to protect our inner selves from being exposed in community. We compartmentalise and learn to function only as needed to fulfil the expectations of those we want most to please, and to fit in with the wider community with which we are familiar. We remain, however, all the while victims of what Thompson calls “disintegration”, which negatively affects our relationships with others.

Primary Principles

Māori Anglican priest and tohunga Māori Marsden, in the collections of his writings titled *The Woven Universe*, reveals that Māori believe the root cause of disharmony in the world is found in broken relationships, between people and God, people and people, and people and creation—or the “Atua, tangata, whenua” interaction that Pa Henare Tate articulated in his proposition of an indigenous theology from a Māori perspective (in *He Puna Iti I Te Ao Mārama*).

For Marsden, broken relationships literally rip the universe apart, or disintegrate reality. One of the highest aims for Māori are integrated relationships, seeking a harmonic balance, primarily through tikanga—right living. I contend that a four-way integrated matrix better expresses the aspiration of Māori. Four ways because relationships do not only exist between us, creation and God in the continuous present, we are also bound in relationship to our heritage, expressed in many cultures as our ancestry—so: Atua, tangata, whenua, whakapapa.



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For Māori, we know because we relate. It is indivisible. Western psychology has only started to realise this fact. The whakatauki (proverb) I began with could be translated in a variety of ways because the Māori words are steeped in meaning:

- Rongo — our sense perception, our engagement with what our senses tell us is real beyond our skin
- Mōhio — our awareness or experiential knowledge, that which we comprehend about the world
- Mārama — enlightenment, revelation, clarity, brightness
- Mātau — understanding to the point of ownership, embodied knowledge if you will
- Ora — life and wellbeing, vitality, health and energy.

So, the essence of fullness of life is rooted in a process of learning that is progressive until it becomes part of who we are, our second nature. It is a process of knowing, and it is a process of being known, because learning is always a communal affair, always relational, especially with Māori.

As psychologist Henry Cloud states in *The Power of the Other*, “Our relationships help write the ‘code’ (in our mind) of whom we become and are becoming.”

Basic Biases

We only have confidence in what we come to know because it is reinforced by the people and context around us. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, Sheryl Silzer maintains that the biases of our families of origin shape our unique engagement with the world. We are hardwired to conform to the image of the world reinforced by those around us. Trouble occurs when we encounter people or phenomena that challenge our deep assumptions about reality.

As we grow and learn our mind expands, in both conscious and subconscious ways. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber theorize that we cognitively construct ways of viewing, interacting and making meaning with the world along lines of least resistance, a systemic model they call relevance theory. It is worth quoting them at length:

Relevance is defined as a property of inputs to cognitive processes (whether external stimuli, which can be perceived and attended to, or internal representations, which can be stored, recalled, or used as premises in inference). An input is relevant to an individual when it connects with available contextual assumptions to yield positive cognitive

effects: for example, true contextual implications, or warranted strengthenings or revisions of existing assumptions. Everything else being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved, and the smaller the mental effort required (to represent the input, access a context and derive these cognitive effects), the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. (Meaning and Relevance)

Again, we see that cognitive awareness, or knowledge, is a process that requires reinforcement or positive effect for it to stick. What we might consider “common sense” could well be seen as resonant relevance. It makes sense only because we perceive it as relevant to what else we have come to know and what our external relationships confirm is true.

Acknowledging Assumptions

I labour the point about knowing from the outset because it is quite critical to our understanding of ourselves, the world around us and, more importantly, our perception of the ‘other’, those foreign to us. If you did not already know, this is the philosophical realm of epistemology, the study of knowing—which is core to all philosophy.

Resonant with John 1:1-5, Māori traditionally held to a view that mind precedes matter. For Māori the source of all things is spiritual, sacred or tapu, which is made manifest from the hau (breath or vital essence) that carries mauri (universal life force) to mauri ora (animated life force) to mana (manifest life force) to mahi (labours) and myriad other results of a person’s volition and action in the world. We are first spiritual personalities (or minds) with physical bodies.

While Western Christians may notionally believe that the source of our personality is in God, there is resistance to the idea that we are connected to a universal spiritual force. In spite of theories of collective unconsciousness in Western psychology and Scriptural evidence that Christ is the source of that unifying spiritual force, albeit one tainted by the influence of Sin on those who remain unreconciled to God. Paul makes this clear to the Colossians...

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. (Colossians 1:15-17 MSG)

Engaging Epistemé

As spiritual beings acting in this world, responding to and sharing stimuli, making sense of it so we can function in multifaceted relationship, we develop collective concepts that guide our interrelated reality. Mid-late twentieth century anthropology coined the term “worldview” to describe this sense-making process, but the idea of worldview has lately proven inadequate. It is far too structured, abstract and depersonalising. It conveys a false sense of objectivity and is essentially an attempt to colonise the lived reality of those being studied.

You might be tempted to label what I have just discussed about life force as “pantheism” or, worse, “animism”, but I would argue terms such as those are Western constructs invented by explorers who found it difficult to reconcile what they encountered with the reality they knew. According to relevance theory, they subsumed the foreign experience into their existing cognitive pathways—that of evolutionary theory and their own place of superiority in the evolutionary process. As a Māori follower of Christ, I reject such categories. I live according to a different epistemé.

Post modernism and its sibling post colonialism have helpfully deconstructed the power systems around bodies of knowledge in the world today. They have destabilised a lot of foundational thinking but this has been a necessary revolution. We are now entering a period of reconstruction and a war is going on for epistemic dominance in the new era.

Epistemé is a term that post-structuralist or post-modern philosopher Michel Foucault coined to refer to bodies of knowledge (Order of Things). I have found this concept far more dynamic and applicable for our era than the rigid colonial constructs of worldview. All micro and macro societies or groups of people have developed somewhat unique epistemé, and groupings of groups share overlapping epistemic assumptions.

Recent work by organisational psychologists have teased out large clusters of epistemic assumptions around the world. These are commonly known as cultural values systems and the analysis of mountains of data have allowed researches such as Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Shalom Schwartz, and Christian Welzel to extrapolate values biases. There is a fair bit of overlap and some disagreement among the researchers as they vie for dominance in the industry, but they all agree that people fall somewhere along the Individual-Collective continuum. Cross-cultural psychologist Harry Triandis identified this continuum concurrently and researched it in depth. The industrial data has proven much of his thesis.

Building on this scientifically robust and commonly accepted values continuum, and my own lived experience as a genetic hybrid, I view the world in terms of two great epistemé (bodies of knowledge): the Individualist or Industrial, and the Collectivist or Indigenous. These two epistemé converge in the international missions community and I have identified the competing assumptions and priorities of each epistemé as the major source of tension in diverse missions groups—or any culturally diverse group for that matter.

While this may on the surface appear grossly reductionist, I contend that any attempt to impose more structure has a colonising effect and should therefore be repudiated. Instead, definition and meaning should be allowed to emerge from within any subset of these two epistemé and assumed as valid without constraint or attempts at reinterpretation by those outside of the in-group. In other words, we need to allow people and groups to self-identify and be content with the way they interpret reality—within reason of course. Any socially destructive epistemé needs some form of regulation.

Reconciling

Difficulties In Difference

Difficulties arise when people from diverse epistemé form some sort of group for whatever reason. The larger the distance between epistemic assumptions, the more potential for tension and misunderstanding. Differing a priori assumptions lead to different priorities which lead to different preferences and on to different practices.

The Western Protestant or Evangelical Church has largely been informed and formed in concert with an increasingly Individualist/Industrial epistemé. Relational expectations develop contractually, are transactional and usually productivity or outcome oriented. That’s why the Western Church and her missions speak in terms of “partnership” and “team” and “working together”. They are word pictures that assume autonomous agents in collaboration. Groups formed and dominated by an Individualist epistemé hold together because of a common aim or objective. They are dependent on outcome. The relationship is one of applying one’s resources (which are owned by the individual contributor) toward the achievement of a task.

Largely due to the enlightenment and theories born out of it from roots in dualistic Greek philosophies, the Individualist/Industrial epistemé views the world mechanistically. Reality is a combination of identified components that can be analysed and manipulated



without concern for the systems they are a part of. That mechanistic view may have begun with the cosmos and our terrestrial environment, but it soon extended to biology and the human being. Philosopher and influencer of C.S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield considered this view of reality separated from its spiritual source as idolatry (*Saving the Appearances*).

It is my conviction that the crisis of decline currently facing the Church in the West is clearly correlated to the decline in confidence of modern or Cartesian rationalism. Western theologies and their expressions in congregational life have become so dependent on rationalism that they are going down with the ship.

In the vast epochs of history, the past 300 hundred years of post-enlightenment modernity are an anomaly, an epistemic experiment that is now found wanting in the face of globalised pluralities. The modern paradigm cannot cope with difference.

What went before, what continued elsewhere, and what will remain is a spiritually connected Collective understanding of reality that is shared by all Indigenous people and more besides. In contrast to the contractual, transactional, productive and ownership orientation of Individualists, the social agreement for Collectivists is covenantal, mutual, reciprocal and relational. The outcome is less important than the relationship building process undertaken along the way. Sharing is more important than acquisition. Very little is individually possessed and nothing is autonomous. Everything is connected and affected by human interference. The responsibility on humans for creation and each other is to nurture and foster growth not to manipulate and consume. Healthy Collectivism seeks to honour and value and give toward the common good.

Unpacking Unity

Now, this sounds very one-sided and idealistic, but it is necessary to rebalance some of the biases of the Individualist epistemé that still hold hegemonic sway over our collective global reality. This is necessary if we are to seek a reconciliation between epistemé. I am not interested in diminishing the Industrial contribution to good in the world, but I am passionate about amplifying the benefits of an Indigenous orientation. My ideal intention is to counterpoint the two epistemé so that they work in harmony with one another to bring the best out of both worlds. I believe a better balance between the two will be the fullest expression of the shalom aims of God revealed in Scripture—a reconciled and resonant relational harmony that I believe needs to become the hermeneutic key for Christian life and mission beyond modernity.

Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in John 17:21-23 where Jesus prays for unity so that the world would know the Father lovingly sent the son. We need to understand that unity as an expression of shalom. We need to see the Kingdom of God as an expression of shalom. We need to read *koinonia* or fellowship as local manifestations of the Kingdom of God, the epistemé of which is shalom. We need to see shalom not as a utopia of autonomous beings but as an intimately interconnected harmony of humanity and creation with the Holy Three, made possible by the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit that connects us all in Christ through resurrection. This is the reconciliation of all things.

Unity may be a wonderful ideal but how can we practice that more effectively this side of our resurrection in light of the differences we are now exposed to in our daily lives? We need to make friends with the tension created by our clashing epistemé.

Growing

Tuning Tension

James wrote,

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. (James 1:2-4)

As probably the earliest of the epistles, the letter from James was written to a mono-cultural audience but not to a singular social class. Where James speaks of troubles, testing and temptations he is not referring to forces external to the community of faith but internal—to relationships within the fellowship. If a mono-cultural class struggle puts our faith to the test, how much more so multi-cultural diversity within the family of faith globally?!

What all the epistles make clear is that the unity Jesus' prayed for did not happen automatically or easily; yet, compared to the rest of the world, it did happen miraculously. The Christ-followers' narrative and communal concerns aligned, and the movement flourished in spite of internal and external pressures.

I find James' perspective of tension revolutionary. He encourages us to embrace it. There is nothing fatalistic about it but there is everything developmental. Relationship tension strengthens our trust in God, our faith, and ultimately shapes our own being.

I undertook narrative life story interviews of Christian Māori perspectives of relationships, constrained by a kaupapa Māori methodology for my doctoral research. As a result, I was gifted treasures that will remain with me for the rest of my life and, I believe, will bless the global Church and her mission. One piece of metaphorical narrative that was particularly paradigm setting was gifted by Arthur Baker a missionary-pastor of Ruatoria, once foster father to the now Archbishop Rev. Don Tamihere. Explaining his perspective of group relationships, as whānau and whanaunga, Arthur said...

...well whānau it can be blood, it's a blood tie, it's a whakapapa tie, well that's basically what it is. But, you know, we could have this man, my brother Jay up here, and there is old Tom over there. For the last 20 years we have met, we've got a bit of a fishing club and we go up to these special lakes—this is our fishing whānau. What we are trying to relate to, is that close element that we experience and have that is like the family or the whanaungatanga in its institution.

You know, (take this big one-pot over here) all the components put together make the whole. Leave the doughboys 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 and have those Dakota Reds or Rua because they are firm and 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 it's 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 (the yeast) amongst all those that are gathered here, and the whānau thing begins to activate and it permeates the whole. It's a spiritual thing, you know? This principle, it's spiritual.

The tension I'm speaking of is the heat in the boil-up. It enables infusion—so long as we remain in the pot. James emphasises this. It is in the persevering that the transformation towards maturity occurs, which we can legitimately identify as growth.

In relationship with God and our contexts we need to learn how to tune that tension with one another in order for harmony to develop. I liken it to an instrument string tightened at both ends until the tension resonates with a harmonic. In the dual epistemé framework, I argue that Individualists require the greatest tuning because of their disproportionate dominance in global relations. The Collectivist end still requires adjustment but they should be considered minor and only as necessary to

bring the epistemé into harmonic relationship in counterpoint with the Individualist.

Harmonic Hybridity

That is all much easier said than done! Yet, with James, I am convinced that a vision of benefit from the process is critical for harmony to emerge. I have adopted the term 'Intercultural Hybridity' to describe the benefits we receive from dwelling in the tensions of difference. I am taking some hermeneutic license but I believe Intercultural Hybridity reflects James's vision of maturity, a by-product (so to speak) of dwelling in the unity Jesus prayed for.

A transformational dynamic occurs when we encounter difference. It happens regardless of our beliefs, but I believe followers of Jesus can maximise the benefits of the dynamic in ways inaccessible to others. Here we have returned to our starting point of knowing and being known. The transformation is a development of our very identity. In the encounter we are changed (if we allow it), we are enlarged, we are affected by the other such that we become a little hybridized or mixed.

I am a genetic hybrid of British, Prussian and Māori heritage. I identify as Māori, even though I was raised in a Pākehā environment and educated as a Pākehā, because I intuitively understand Te Ao Māori, the world of Māori, when I encounter it. It feels like home to me. In our mobile world, genetic hybridity is becoming increasingly common and acceptable, although not without its identity complications. I see genetic blending as an asset not a liability.

We do not all have the benefit of genetic blending, but we can all experience increasing degrees of Intercultural Hybridity, a necessity for the globalised world we now live in and are being affected by due to mass migration. Humanity has never experienced difference to the degree we are today and the complexity it is creating is overwhelming. The solution is not more dominant control. The solution is to yield to mutuality and reciprocity—but it is not easy. No gain without pain.

When we encounter difference our deep mind is challenged, and we are driven to reconcile the difference—to seek resolution. That can come in the form of stiff resistance or dismissive ignorance because we cannot find a point of relevance and the other is perceived as a threat. Alternatively, it can be met with curious openness, seeing the encounter pregnant with potential to enlarge our view and understanding of the world because we are all ultimately related via a common spiritual connection (which the principle of Imago Dei would suggest).



Intercultural specialist Joseph Shaules maintains that “Many of these reactions and changes... take place at the hidden level of unconscious cognition” (The Intercultural Mind). Positive transformation and growth happens when we allow ourselves to be affected. In many ways our mind, the core of our being, which includes but extends beyond our cognition, grows like a muscle with the breaking down and the rebuilding of relevance.

In keeping with our exploration of ‘knowing’, I refer to this process as ‘epistemic rupturing’, a concept I borrow from educationalist James Loder. Reflecting on his own traumatic experience, Loder recognised that we learn, grow or are enlarged by experiences that challenge our prior understanding. In his work, *The Transforming Moment*, Loder identified a five-stage process of “therapeutic knowing” from an encounter with conflict in context (the rupturing) through to integrated

interpretation of the experience as part of the self (the resolution).

As with any traumatic experience we do not leave the encounter unchanged, more often than not we are better off. Studies in post traumatic growth are bearing this out. Dwelling with people from different epistemé may seem minor in comparison with a major life crisis but it is a trauma nonetheless. Our understanding of the world is ruptured and we need to reconcile the experience through to resolution. Assuming resolution is one of embrace not exclusion, we become a little more interculturally hybrid than we were before the encounter.

Dwell with a culturally diverse group for an extended period, as people in missions groups tend to do, and you will be forever different from those you left behind in your context or origin—and that outcome needs to be seen as beneficial, if not highly prized in the Kingdom of God, as maturity.

Conclusion

Ecologists identify a space where two distinctive domains meet and integrate as an ecotone. ‘Eco’ referring to the environment and ‘tone’ from the Greek ‘tonos’ referring to stress or tension. In these spaces where two distinct biological communities intersect, quite distinct species have been found, along with hybridized species. This is a fair parallel to the new type of life that can emerge from the meeting of different epistemic domains.

Much more could be said about how to navigate the space between domains in order to bring resolution to the rupturing that happens in our encounters with the other. Māori protocols, particularly those experienced in a powhiri, provide highly developed maps toward relational harmony.

For this presentation today, however, it is sufficient that I have established that knowing is a socially constructed developmental process, that difference arises because of distinct historic and contextual factors that influence knowing, that reconciliation of difference requires a vulnerable commitment to unity, and that growth results in the form of Intercultural Hybridity if we allow the process of epistemic rupturing to work through to resolution.

Waiata

In my episteme it is necessary and appropriate for me to conclude with a waiata that speaks about aligning together by seeking enlightened understanding and love.

Tūtira mai ngā iwi

Tātou tātou e

Tūtira mai ngā iwi

Tātou tātou e

Whaia te maramatanga

Me te aroha - e ngā iwi!

Kia tapatahi,

Kia kotahi rā.

Tātou tātou e

Tātou tātou e.

Look this way together, people

All of us, all of us.

Align together, people

All of us, all of us.

Seek after enlightenment

and love of others - everybody!

Think as one,

Act as one.

All of us

All of us.

The All Black supporters’ version of this song can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxorRtINRTc>

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