



Whanaungatanga: Theological Implications

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Jay Matenga argues that the Evangelical church is struggling to remain relevant in the Western hemisphere because Evangelical theology is so closely aligned to, and defined by, rationalism. Setting the industrial/individualist West in one knowledge domain, Jay proposes a way forward from an indigenous/collectivist domain. He introduces whanaungatanga as an interpretive lens that can reveal fresh understanding of our relationships with God, each other, creation and history.

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! He toa taumata rau (courage has many resting places).

Methodology

The whakatauki (proverb) above became my guiding metaphor as I crafted the shape of my doctoral research and settled on a mixed-methods research methodology constrained by what is now accepted in the academy of Aotearoa New Zealand as “kaupapa Māori research methodology” — by Māori, with Māori, for Māori, according to Māori philosophy, first-principles or “kaupapa”.

The common translation of this whakatauki as I have given it is not literal. It could be interpreted in a variety of ways but the main interpretation is the image of a group of warriors resting at a vantage point overlooking a territory they are about to engage. “Toa” is brave, “taumata” is a resting place on a hill, “rau” is to gather or collect. Furthermore, presumably connected with this imagery, “taumata rau” refers to people of extraordinary note. (As we continue, make of that what you will.)

This word picture sums up my intention to survey two distinct landscapes from a unique vantage point. God used this whakatauki to encourage me to be strong and courageous, to be steadfast and to be willing, to face what I would find along the journey. In Māori: kia kaha, kia maia, kia manawanui.

Although constrained by kaupapa Māori methodology, I used two sociological research methods to explore the domains I saw from my vantage point—a vantage point of genetic hybridity as a Māori with Pākēhā heritage,

upbringing and education. The realm of my investigation was the global evangelical missions community and the domains were identified as the world of traditional missionary sending nations on the one side (which I also call the Industrial world) and new missionary sending nations on the other (Indigenous worlds).

Investigation into the underlying presuppositions of the traditional sending nations was undertaken as a literature review of missions publications from 1990, where such literature discussed relationships in missions, especially relationships across cultures. That fell into two broad categories: Partnership Development and Peer Relations.

To understand the domain of new sending nations, I undertook life story narrative interviews with eighteen Māori Christian participants, most of whom had cross-cultural experience outside of Aotearoa New Zealand, although that was not originally a study criteria. Carrying more than 20 years of international missions experience into this research as a Māori, 15 of those working alongside leaders from new sending nations, I had reason to believe that Māori Christians would reasonably represent a perspective similar to those from new sending nations.

Through these methods, and drawing on categories well established in organisational social psychology and cross-cultural psychology, I found that missionaries from traditional sending nations are predominantly



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Individualist in nature and motivation, with those from new sending nations more Collectivist, with data provided by Māori kaikorero (narrators) confirming the Collectivist bias.

By the end of my research I was able to identify some key points of conflict that arise in missions groups in the meeting of the two great domains. My objective was to point toward a theory for effectively counterpointing these two domains in order that people from each could dwell more effectively together in Christian harmony so that the world would know that the Father lovingly sent the Son (John 17:21-23).

I located that theory in the work of educational theorist James Loder (Loder, 1989), bolstered by the emerging science of interpersonal neurobiology (e.g. Cloud, 2016; Siegel, 2012; Thompson, 2010), which points to the potential for Intercultural Hybridity to develop from epistemic rupturing that occurs when people encounter and adapt to challenges to their preferred ways of understanding the world.

One way of conceiving of the benefits that can emerge from the meeting of two distinct knowledge domains—or epistemé, to borrow from Michel Foucault's nomenclature (Foucault, 1994)—is to look to nature and the hybridity that forms in the intersection of two biomes or ecological domains, which environmental biologists call an "ecotone" (Krall, 1994), eco meaning environment, and tone meaning tension (which we will revisit later).

I contend that the development of Intercultural Hybridity should become the desirable goal of disciples participating in God's mission to extend Christ's kingdom in the world.

Rather than inventing and using *means* to show the world who Christ is, as William Carey emphasized in his *Enquiry* (Carey, 1792), Jesus made it clear that it would be through our committed loving relationships with one another, discernible as unity, that the world will know (again, John 17:21-23). For over 240 years of the evangelical church movement and its modern missions we have put the proverbial cart before the horse. This is a direct outcome of Western evangelical theology becoming increasingly industrial/individualistic, and in our globalised contemporary reality it is found wanting.

Findings

Although my thesis was limited in application to the global missions community, my findings are widely applicable to the evangelical church at large and evangelical theology in general. We all live in a particular knowledge domain or epistemé. You might be tempted

to call it a 'worldview', 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.

While we may exist within a distinct epistemé, that is not to suggest it is hermetically sealed or homogenous, but it is usually constrained by a hegemonic perspective—our hermeneutic community. This is the group with whom we share a similar interpretation of reality.

I concede that separating the world into two epistemé is artificially binary. That is a necessity inherent in setting research parameters. This particular construct may on the surface appear reductionist, but 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 resistance.

Be that as it may, where people from these general epistemé regularly interact, as they do in missions groups and increasingly in our culturally diverse churches, comparisons and conflicts inevitably emerge that beg for a way to be reconciled. By counterpointing each perspective, they are simultaneously validated and contrasted, but to create harmony between them they need a basis on which to reach compromises that foster healthy relationships. Jesus provides that basis, the Holy Spirit enables that to happen, and Intercultural Hybridity develops in each group or community participant. This can all be identified as the outworking of loving unity—made more potent to the world because of our visible diversity.

As I noted above, my investigation of underlying assumptions in missions literature post-1990 revealed the dominant perspective to be individualistic. This emerges from a mechanistic view of reality, that allows investigators to break down phenomena into constituent parts and seek ways to resolve issues by dealing with each problematic component. Almost all authors used some form of functionalist cultural theory to identify components, diagnose problematic issues and engineer potential solutions drawing on business paradigms. This approach, drawn from modern scientific theory, was applied in missions literature to cultural differences within what authors insist on calling 'teams'.

'Team' was the preferred metaphor guiding the peer relationship discourse, which I showed to have Industrial epistemic limits that can inhibit Collectivists from flourishing. A team is made up of constituent parts all having different functions, applying means to work out a defined strategy toward a common goal or outcome. It is a thoroughly teleological view of relationships where they are used as one of multiple means to other ends.

In counterpoint to the teleological orientation of relationships prevalent in contemporary missions literature, the data gifted to me by my Māori Christian narrators showed a distinct ontological orientation in forming and maintaining relationships. Healthy and harmonious relationships are ends to which everything else is means.

Māori describe this as whanaungatanga, the practice and principles of 'leaning in' toward others. Where whānau (with the macron) indicates familial relationships, whanau (without the macron) is defined in H. W. Williams' Māori language dictionary as, "to lean, incline or bend down" (Williams, 2000). While distinctive, whanau is commonly related to whānau and in practice whanaungatanga indicates committed, mutually deferential relationships. If this sounds vaguely Biblically resonant, just wait, there's more.

An Industrial Crisis

Data from the lived experience of relationships by Māori Christians showed a marked contrast from the concept of relationships in most of the missions-related literature and this flows over into the development of contextual theology, particularly in missions.

The dual-domain perspective I surveyed from my hybrid vantage point created two quite distinct lists of difference between the epistémé. The so-called West and the rest', Occidental and Oriental, Developed and Majority worlds, Individual and Collectivist, Industrial and Indigenous, however you wish to label these epistemic domains they are marked by separated and integrated views of reality. Borrowing from Max Weber, Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* considers these Disenchanted and Enchanted domains (Taylor, 2007) and believes the Western world is nostalgically yearning for a return to an enchanted view of reality. Owen Barfield, influencer of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien, argues in *Saving The Appearances* that the materialist modern society is steeped in idolatry precisely because it refuses to acknowledge meaning in material reality separated from its spiritual source. Rather than seeking a nostalgic return to an enchanted (by implication a fantasy) reality, Barfield argues we need to more fully

enter into our participation with the Divine through Christ, thus reintegrating our reality by rediscovering our meaning. Here Barfield joins Newbigin (Newbigin, 1989, 1995) in following Polanyi (Polanyi, 1975).

I present these two philosophers because they represent a present struggle in the modern academy to find a way to reintegrate what has been divorced through platonic assumption: separating the material from the spiritual, with the spiritual eventually being discredited and dismissed. In an attempt to validate their belief in God, Western theologians have increasingly played the game according to the rules of their enlightenment epistémé. The most obvious example of this is systematic theology which applies the scientific method in an attempt to present the reality of God as a set of interrelated components or axioms. While in many ways helpful, it is no longer relevant for our era, locally or, for the most part, globally.

Furthermore, 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, and we are wanting for a life boat.

An Indigenous Solution

Thankfully there is hope to be found in the indigenous epistémé which, by and large, retains an integrated view of reality as indivisibly physical and spiritual. This view is entirely relational, in counterpoint to the rational view that is in decline. This view is also thoroughly resonant with the narrative of Scripture.

Whanaungatanga is a principle not only applicable to interpersonal relationships. It is applicable to all relationships and effectively summarises the posture we are to have with the Creator and all of creation enlivened by the Creator. It is a posture of mutual dependence and deference, of deep respect and appreciation for the unique contributions each brings to the relationship. Of course, we cannot say the Creator is dependent upon us, but there is a clear mutuality in our relationship with the Holy Three in Scripture and I am content to let that remain a mystery.

The perspective of which I speak has been identified as panentheism, but that is a Western construct and I prefer not to apply that to indigenous realities. Suffice it to say, all of creation is mysteriously related to God. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, "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 1:16-17, The Message Version). For Māori, this makes perfect sense.

Descartes argued “I think therefore I am”. Ubuntu philosophy in many parts of Africa would say “I am because we are” (Mbiti, 1990). This Collectivist assumption is borne out in my narrative interview data also. However, I have reframed it as, “I know because I relate”, and the principle of building relationship, or whanaungatanga, has become a hermeneutic key with which I unlock meaning in Scripture. It is also the source of my articulation of the Church’s mission in the world as the ministry of reconciliation towards relational harmony.

This is captured in the Old Testament with the concept of shalom and carried over in the New Testament, particularly as koinonia. It is a state of communal being, where there is no longer any debt owed in the relationship but freedom, sharing and integrated mutuality. Therein lies evidence of the power of God, an attractive reality for all but the most destructive of personalities. It is a reality only made possible through allegiance to Christ, the King of that domain and adherence to the ethics of that domain, which are rooted and revealed in the character of God.

With whanaungatanga as the lens through which to read Scripture, the heart of God’s mission in the world begins to shift its focus. It shifts from a high concern for productivity, as in the Industrial epistemé, where the purpose of God’s mission is to make converts, win souls, take territory or some other measurable metric, and it shifts to the development of citizens of a new reality, a new Iwi with Ihu Karaiti as Ariki nui, the high Chief.

Theology, then, ceases to be an exercise of apologetics, as if to win some sort of cosmic argument, and becomes an articulation of covenantal community. The chief concern being to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace (Eph 4:3)—which evokes relational harmony. Sin, then, is that which destroys relationships—the ‘will-to-power’ if you will, as opposed to than the will-to-love, within which we discover our will-to-meaning (Frankl, 2006).

I am not alluding to ‘situational ethics’ here. I am appealing to a transcendent ethic that is rooted and revealed in the character of God, which is love; which is manifest (Leon Morris argues) as joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). With these as just some examples of God’s character traits, each society would be free to develop a morality to fit their context in such a way that relationships are strengthened rather than destroyed. For example, while monogamy is promoted

in the New Testament and has become a culturally appropriate manifestation of fidelity for a Western context, an argument could be made for polygamy as an appropriate manifestation of fidelity in a traditional African context. What would be morally reprehensible is infidelity, in any context. Let that challenge the Church.

It is beyond the scope of this article to wade deeper into today’s morality debate, but much could be resolved if we adopted an integrated relational theology and realigned our focus on Christ-centred ethics, which remain eternal, rather than culturally-determined norms which shift with the winds of change.

Anglican priest and tohunga, Māori Marsden argued that, for Māori, broken relationships literally rip the universe apart, or disintegrate reality. As I said, one of the highest aims for Māori are integrated relationships, seeking a harmonic balance, and this is primarily achieved through tikanga—right living (righteousness).

Pa Henare Tate has proposed an indigenous Māori theology of relationship between Atua (God) tangata (people) and whenua (the land). I propose a cruciform relationship connection between Atua (ascendant/celestial/spiritual), tangata and whenua (horizontal/terrestrial/physical), and whakapapa (descendent/historical), because we are the by-product of our heritage in which our epistemé is rooted and our reality is formed and worked out.

Again, all this is consonant with the Biblical narrative where Israel was charged with remembering their past for its application to the present, and then prophetically held to account when relationships disintegrated and power was abused. Throughout Scripture, relational harmony is the highest concern for God because it is in very nature God, the perfect union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Growth

As every musician knows, you cannot create sound without tension. The very word tone (tonos) means ‘under tension’. Studying for my MA under Christopher J. H. Wright, one of his favourite encouragements was to hold things in ‘creative tension’. In order to generate a theology that will *resonate* with our ‘post-everything’ society and societies around the world we need to relinquish certainty and embrace tension.

If it is not careful, absolutism will be the hill Evangelicalism dies on. Am I advocating relativism? No, I am not, but I am advocating for only one absolute, one certainty, around which everything else can be culturally relative. Like an anchor on a stormy sea or a rock in

shifting sand, that absolute is a transcendent community of Persons with whom we are in relationship: God.

Like tuning a guitar string, it is only when we allow ourselves to experience relational tension that harmony can emerge. This is what I concluded in my thesis and what is being promoted in psychology and neurobiology as post-traumatic growth. We are who we are because of our relationships. We will become what we become because of our relationships. This is core to understanding the process of discipleship and Christian maturity. Nowhere is this better articulated than in James' epistle, which is almost entirely focused on relationships within the fledgling community of disciples that were living with the tensions of troubles, testings, and temptations... with each other.

James implores his readers to hold fast to their loyalty to God (and by implication to each other) for when they persevere they mature as disciples toward wholeness and complete satisfaction, and this is the cause for great joy. Go back and read James through a whanaungatanga or relational lens and I guarantee you will read it radically differently. Faith without deeds? Those deeds have little to do with social action, they are communal—familial

Conclusion

To reinforce the potential of whanaungatanga, I conclude with a gift from one of my kaikorero, Arthur Baker, a missionary-pastor from Ruatoria. 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 eh. 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 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* (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 have been speaking of is the heat in the boil-up. It enables infusion—so long as we remain in the pot. That's indigenous theology. So, let's align ourselves together, as the waiata goes...

even—relationship obligations. Faith is made evident within the community because of our mutuality and reciprocity, because of our obligation to love one another, enduring through the tensions that inevitably arise as troubles, testing and temptation in relationships.

Whanaungatanga, in its idealised form at least, allows relationships to experience a tremendous amount of tension without breaking the relationship. People are encouraged to remain in the relationship and to see the conflict through to resolution. Through this process everyone learns and grows. So too with the Christian community. We stay at the table to work through the tensions to resolution, guided by the character of God revealed through the Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit who teaches us to defer in love, repent, forgive and reconcile.

Who then is expelled from the community? Those who persistently refuse to abide by the ethics of the Kingdom and by doing so reject the Lordship of Christ. They are destroyers and perverters of relationships and they have no place in the family of God... until they repent and realign themselves.



Tūtira mai ngā iwi	Look this way together, people
Tātou tātou e	All of us, all of us.
Tūtira mai ngā iwi	Align together, people
Tātou tātou e	All of us, all of us.
Whaia te maramatanga	Seek after enlightenment
Me te aroha - e ngā iwi!	and love of others - everybody!
Kia tapatahi,	Think as one,
Kia kotahi rā.	Act as one.
Tātou tātou e	All of us
Tātou tātou e.	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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