Book Review


Edited collections of ‘hard’ science articles can be notoriously difficult to review, especially when different disciplines are involved. This book is easier to consider as a whole because it discusses the interface between climate science generally considered and grassroots religious attitudes in the Pacific Islands (largely the western side of Oceania). The editors state at the beginning, moreover, as academics from Queensland’s tropical University of the Sunshine Coast (founded 1994), that their book is not ‘about religion, nor is about climate change’, but ‘about survival’ in island environmental contexts badly affected by disasters and adverse changes (p. v). It is a successful project for alerting readers to the terrifying prospect for the Pacific of more nuclear testing, many islands being ‘drowned’ due to sea-level rises, and a further intensification of cyclonic weather events. The book is also a first for putting scientists into conversation with religious outlooks found in the huge region. The editors foreshadowed this volume’s appearance with a seminal 2020 article that reviewed ‘faith-engaged approaches and opportunities’ in adapting to climate change throughout Oceania.

Co-authored papers predominate, mostly by Queensland academics yet with some significant inclusion of islander researchers. In rough order, topics cover the clash of secularism and religion; nuclear testing; attributing causes to changes in local food production (Malaita, Solomon Islands); local beliefs about what is behind climate change (especially Fiji, but also Madang, [north coast Papua New Guinea (PNG)], Raja Ampat [West Papua], and Kiribati in Micronesia); with much environmental theology contextualized for Pacific conditions. Contributions keep the same basic issues of global environmental problems in mind, but the religious and theological approaches are richly diverse, some issuing out of traditional religious outlooks or responding to them, and others working out theological insights in new ways because the challenges of the Pacific are special and complex.

In the present intellectual climate in the West, with contempt towards conservative religion by the ‘ultra-science atheists’ (the shrillest voices being Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens) and the ink spilt against their stridencies (especially by Curtis White and Ian Markham), *Beyond Belief* makes the point that the Pacific is a massively Christianizing arena and ‘Climate Change Management’ cannot happen without scientific researchers’ respectful consideration of local religious positions. So, we learn a good deal about spirits, ancestors, mythic events, and taboo-breakage behind environmental fertility or damage, oral traditions about having to move inland or to the hills after past catastrophes, Christian hopes of divine care and promises of an End to all troubles, etc., with the stress on one thing or the other in each article depending on highly
specific situations researched. The point is that local thinking ordinarily dismissed from the ‘scientific purview’ are given respectful airing in these studies because a wide spectrum of explanatory responses will and should be listened to fairly in survival modes. When a whole people’s island world looks like it is ending, for a start, then eschatological reactions will hardly be unexpected. Nearly half the authors are active in the environmental sciences, and one is an anthropologist collaborating with a WWF conservation project, and they lead the way in exemplary sensitivity.

What especially holds the collection together is a faith engagement, principally Christian for the Pacific scene, that seeks to foster a maturing of eco-theology adapted to local cultures, well worked out theoretically, grounded in empirical research, sound in representation of Biblical affirmations of Creation, and honouring stakeholders with spiritual values in environmental problem-solving. For editor Patrick Nunn, the need for this was clearly evinced after sampling 1226 University of the South Pacific student responses about climate change issues, revealing (in his co-authored 2016 report) an overwhelming insistence that ‘faith-based communications are more likely to be effective’ in meeting climate change challenges ‘than secular ones’ (p. 387). This will help explain the interesting presence of theological papers on divine justice (chapter 6), eschatology (chapter 9), public theology (chapter 10) eco-theology (chapter 18), and faith (the final chapter 19), admittedly largely by Europeans, but obviously unaware of indigenous theologians of Creation and the Land. And the notification of Christian pastoral care in crisis situations (handled within chapter 7) is well taken.

As a long-time researcher of Pacifica I see the need for greater appreciation of warnings already made for decades about climate issues in local publications (threatened reefs in the Micronesian Reporter, etc., lessons from cyclones in Mission Review, or theorizing in the PNG Post-Courier, as by Cornell-trained Michael Wandil, now Administrator of the Jiwaka Province, that there have been larger cycles of increased wet and dry in the PNG highlands). I admit that realizing this probably amounts to a sizeable history thesis, although there is little sign in this book of those saying ‘we tried to tell you that’ (cf. Kirk Huffman in Explore 2009), and some old landmark statements of relevance, most notably A Call to a New Exodus: An Anti-Nuclear Primer for Pacific Peoples (by S. Siwatibau and B.D. Williams for the Pacific Council of Churches, 1982) are strangely passed unnoticed. The engagement of the arts (religious statements through music, dance, theatre, images, etc.) could have been encompassed, especially considering the sponsorship by Edvard Hviding (note p. 284) of an islander dance troupe lamenting homeland drowning before the European Parliament in 2016. How resource exploitations from ‘the North’ in the Pacific ‘South’ fit into climate change politics and management also requires reckoning, and I believe with a greater sense of liberationist force and prophetic outrage than any of the thoughtful contributors have voiced. But this collection suitably sets the agenda for further labors. It is to be very much recommended and will hopefully stir practicing scientists from a worrying myopia over spiritual approaches toward environmental health and crises, for global solutions cannot be found without combined attention to ‘Religion and Nature’.

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