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From apathy to agency: Exploring religious responses to climate change in the Pacific Island region

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Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Port Vila, Vanuatu and with the Pacific Climate Warriors, this chapter challenges dominant narratives concerning the Pacific Island region that marginalise religious understandings of climate change and that perpetuate visions of inevitable island inundation and helpless Islanders. Instead it argues that religious responses can form part of a more empowering, alternative framing of climate change and the Pacific Islands. It explores the roles of prayer, sin, and suffering, recognising that agency appears in unexpected places. Through emphasising the sin of carbon emissions, Islanders take on the burden of climate change causation. This approach both situates climate change discourses within the wider context of perceived moral decline, and, through emphasising local responsibility, facilitates Islander agency. By contrast narratives of divine accompaniment reject these accounts of local responsibility and retributive suffering, and instead emphasise the moral responsibility of industrial nations, whilst reframing climate activism as a form of spiritual devotion. These heterogeneous religious interpretations highlight the diverse possibilities for spiritually informed agency in the face of climate change impacts and the richness of locally meaningful and morally compelling counter-narratives of climate change.

Cite this article: Fair, H. (2019): From apathy to agency: Exploring religious responses to climate change in the Pacific Island region. In: Klöck, C. & Fink, M. (eds.): *Dealing with climate change on small islands: Towards effective and sustainable adaptation?* (pp. 175–194). Göttingen: Göttingen University Press. <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1216>

1 Introduction

March 12, 2015: as Cyclone Pam, a category five tropical storm bore down upon Oceania, the pan-Pacific climate activist group the Pacific Climate Warriors exhorted their Facebook and Twitter followers to #PrayforthePacific. Concentrating efforts on the threats posed to Vanuatu, simultaneous prayer circles were held across the Pacific Island region, and Vanuatu-oriented prayer memes circulated, written in languages from Niue, Fiji, Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea and the Marshall Islands. This event, largely overshadowed by the colossal impacts of the storm, highlights the place of religious responses to anthropogenic climate change: is it a help or a hindrance to climate adaptation in small island states if those at the forefront of climate justice struggles are encouraging their followers to “pray for the Pacific”?

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Vanuatu and with the Pacific Climate Warriors, I contend it is the former. However, I begin by acknowledging cases I encountered where religious belief was concomitant with apathy in the face of climate change: prayer as a substitute for action, and climate change understood as a form of sanction. I then complicate these ideas of the role of prayer, sin, and suffering, recognising that agency appears in unexpected places. I argue that religious discourses can form part of a more empowering, alternate framing of climate change and the Pacific Islands. I conclude that through focusing on religious understandings one can still foreground Islander agency, highlighting the richness of locally meaningful and morally compelling counter-narratives of climate change in the Pacific Island region.

2 Religious marginalisation and inevitable inundation

In this chapter I build upon previous calls to spiritualise climate change (Hulme, 2009), acknowledging that religious perspectives can act as a “cultural resource” in movements for adaptation and mitigation, providing morally compelling narratives (Hulme 2017, p. 15). This is particularly pressing in the Pacific Island region, as some limitations of climate change adaptation efforts in Oceania can be attributed to the secularity of mainstream climate change messaging (Nunn, 2017). Yet this spiritualisation has been hindered by the marginalisation and undervaluation of religious understandings of climate change in the social science literature (Kempf, 2017) and in climate activist organising (Tiumalu, 2014). For instance, the relationship between religious belief and understandings of climate change in the Pacific has been framed in terms of “complacency about environmental change” (McAdam, 2011, p. 114), spiritual interpretations of extreme weather events condemned for being “inappropriate and anachronistic” (Taylor, 1999, n.p.), and religious faith characterised as “avoidant behaviour” (Kuruppu & Liverman, 2011, p. 666). This amounts to a social science literature that deems religious belief as “a barrier to awareness of and adaptation to climate change” (Mortreux & Barnett,

2009, p. 110). Kempf (2017) contends that this marginalisation of spiritual thought emerges from a misguided attempt to purify and hierarchise scientific and religious knowledges, with the former deemed epistemically superior, a purification I have previously tried to challenge through advocating a simultaneous balancing of multiple knowledges of climate change (Fair, 2018). In order to further counter this marginalisation and recognise the potential for spiritual understandings to contribute to climate change adaptation, and to address the shortage of social scientific accounts of religious engagements with climate change (Haluza-DeLay, 2014), here I centre on questions of the association of religious understandings with avoidance and complacency, and thus unpack questions of agency.

These questions of agency in relation to climate change and the Pacific Island region speak to a wider debate regarding the framing of climate change narratives. While fully acknowledging the enormous current and future material threats climate change poses to Pacific Island nations (Nurse et al., 2014), some scholars have challenged how these threats are commonly discursively framed. Hulme (2016, p. 101) highlights how images of “the Pacific island atoll and the stranded helpless island victim forced to migrate and in need of ‘saving’ by an enlightened world [...] function as attractive and ubiquitous representations of climate-change”. Documentary accounts of Tuvalu, replete with eschatological titles such as *Paradise Drowned* and *Before the Flood*, have emphasised the powerlessness of Tuvaluan communities and the imminence of Tuvalu’s demise (Chambers & Chambers, 2007). News coverage of Tuvalu has repeatedly constructed the island nation as helpless and inevitably endangered in comparison with portrayals of Australia as strong and unthreatened by climate change (Farbotko, 2005). Notably, these representations did not acknowledge the role of Australia’s fossil fuel industries in Tuvalu’s predicament. Meanwhile, other news accounts have treated island futures in an even more blasé way, such as in the flippant headline “Tuvalu Toodle-oo” (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 169).

As Hulme (2016, p. 101) notes, these contemporary discourses of inevitable inundation “are deeply rooted in a particular western cultural imaginary and perpetuate colonial and Eurocentric constructions of Pacific islands”. For instance, principles of insularity, concretion and alterity underlie simplistic and alarmist popular scientific schemas of “disappearing” and “abandoned” islands, rendering the Pacific Islands isolated, graspable, and fundamentally Other (Kempf, 2015). These discourses reinforce representations of Oceania’s islands as “sites of backwardness [...] constraint, fragility and weakness” (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 2).

Consequently, this inevitable inundation discourse, rather than ameliorating vulnerability, is reinforcing and even producing it, and thereby further marginalising Pacific Islanders (Webber, 2013). For instance, through the performance of climate vulnerability in Kiribati, other development concerns such as maternal health are sidelined, thereby further disadvantaging island communities (Webber, 2013). An excessive focus on climate change can occlude the other current social and economic challenges faced by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Kelman

& West, 2009). And due to the future orientation of the inevitable inundation narrative and the dramatic potency of sea level rise (Mortreux & Barnett, 2009), more immediate and less spectacular impacts of climate change are overlooked (Farbotko, 2005).

Ultimately, through its invocation of total inundation, this drowning islands discourse presents the Pacific as already lost. The proposed inevitability of relocation suggests mitigation efforts are hopelessly inadequate and thereby legitimises inaction by carbon-intensive countries (McNamara & Gibson, 2009), threatening to transform climate migration into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Atolls are made discursively valuable through their loss, a process that Farbotko (2010) describes as “wishful sinking”. She argues that the threat of island inundation and population displacement is required in order to legitimise and maintain a global climate change narrative. There is both a desire to avert sea level rise and a degree of impatience and expectancy as Tuvalu is deemed as expendable and thereby an acceptable price to pay for the global wake-up call that its devastation would produce.

These discourses of vulnerability also entail the “foreclosing [of] alternative and empowering political identities” (Webber, 2013, p. 2720). They disempower and deny affected communities their agency, instead confining individuals to a position of victimhood (McNamara & Gibson, 2009). Framings of Islander identities that incorporate strength and resourcefulness are marginalised (Farbotko, 2005). Thus, the inevitable inundation discourse can perpetuate existing notions of vulnerability, inhibit rather than encourage action on climate change, disempower communities, and unintentionally exacerbate existing ecological and socio-economic problems.

These two concerns – the marginalisation of religious understandings and the perpetuation of simplistic and disempowering narratives of climate change – have two major connections. Firstly, I contend that the association of religious belief with complacency mirrors this wider denial of Islander agency found within the inevitable inundation discourse. Secondly, looking to religious understandings can help counter this damaging dominant discourse. Rather than further relying on external and othering Eurocentric perceptions of the Pacific, foregrounding Islander understandings of climate change entails seriously grappling with the role of religious belief. Moreover, in offering locally meaningful and morally compelling counternarratives of climate change, religious perspectives suggest what a more empowering discourse of climate change and the Pacific Islands could look like, one that values local epistemologies and resists a future of inevitable total loss. Therefore, through exploring the relationships between agency, apathy, and religious belief this research speaks to the broader question of what it could mean – in the words of activist network the Pacific Climate Warriors – for Oceania to be “not drowning but fighting”.

3 Methodology

This chapter draws upon a month of participant observation conducted with the pan-Pacific activist group the Pacific Climate Warriors in 2014 during their Australian campaign tour across Sydney, Newcastle, and Melbourne, and four months of ethnography in Port Vila, Vanuatu in 2015, immediately after Cyclone Pam. During my fieldwork I conducted over sixty interviews in English or Bislama, audio-recording all but three and fully transcribing them (with the Bislama interviews transcribed by research assistants), and then coding and qualitatively thematically analysing them and my field notes using NVivo. I recruited interviewees through “purposive non-random sampling” (Davis, Hayes-Conroy, & Jones, 2007, p. 166), beginning with individuals involved with the Pacific Climate Warriors advocacy network and then snowballing to include a greater range of figures actively engaged with climate change adaptation, communication, and advocacy (see Table 1 for interviewee demographics), greatly aided by Vachette’s (2014) social network analysis, which mapped relations between different actors in the Vanuatu climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction sectors prior to Cyclone Pam. While interview topics were wide-ranging, it is specifically participants’ views on and engagements with faith-based responses to climate change that form the substance for this chapter.

To complement climate-based expertise with religious expertise, I also solicited the wisdom and reflections of pastors from a wide range of denominations with regards to church responses to and biblical interpretations of climate change. I contend that the first category of interviewees constitutes the dominant voices within Vanuatu with regards to climate discourse, whilst the latter category, the pastors, represent figures of great significance and social influence who are in many ways still at the margins of climate discussion.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

Interviewee category	# of interviewees
Pacific Climate Warriors	14
Vanuatu-based youth climate advocates	8
Chiefly or governmental authority	7
Priests and religious authorities	10
Ni-Vanuatu NGO workers	14
Ex-patriate NGO workers	13
Total	66

Because of the near ubiquity of Christianity in Vanuatu, statistically in terms of the number of adherents and its cultural and social significance (Tomlinson & McDougall, 2013) I focus exclusively on Christian beliefs and understandings.¹

¹ For consideration of how these interact with scientific and *kastom* knowledges see Fair (2018). *Kastom* here refers to Ni-Vanuatu “indigenous knowledge and practice” (Taylor 2016a, p. 139)

According to the most recent census, 28% of Vanuatu's population is Presbyterian, 15% are Anglican, another 12% are Roman Catholic, and 12% are Seventh Day Adventist (SDA). The remaining 13% of the Christian population is spread across a number of different smaller denominations, including the Church of Christ, the Assemblies of God, the Neil Thomas Ministry, and the Mormon Church (VNSO, 2009). The pastors I spoke with all belonged to the four largest churches, as did the vast majority of my research participants. Thus, although this research cannot claim to speak to all Christian denominations currently present in Vanuatu, it does consider the beliefs of the four most popular, who collectively make up almost 84% of the country's Christian population.

4 Religiously informed climate apathy

I begin by exploring the extent to which faith can lead to apathy in the face of climate change. Firstly, some participants in Vanuatu did still legitimise climate inaction through their religious understandings. As one member of the Anglican Church explained to me,

The word of God says that it is not for you to worry about the weather [...] God is the boss of the clouds and all of the other things up there, he sends rain to come, he sends wind to come [...] nature is controlled by God. Then for us to try to solve climate change, we can't. Because only God will say what happens tomorrow [...] When people come and talk about climate change with us, we understand it as a natural disaster so there's no need to worry about it. Because if you worry about it, it's not your business. It's not my business. It's God's business. (Deborah, Anglican Church)²

This echoes Donner's (2007) argument that within a Pacific Islander context especially the weather and the climate are seen as part of the domain of the gods, in contrast to the land, which is under the dominion of humans, suggesting an inability to act in the face of climate change and even a denial of its anthropogenic nature. While this expression of unconcern was anomalous among my participants, the suggestion that climate change was in God's hands, and therefore beyond the purview of human action, did chime with the sentiment voiced by another participant that the only avenue open to those in Vanuatu was prayer. This was most notably in relation to the actions of neighbouring Australia, who was acknowledged to have caused the pollution that was affecting Vanuatu.

If after that, Australia doesn't want to do that [to change], then the people of Vanuatu will pray "Father God, you keep climate change as it has been for all time and you keep us safe". Because of all of the big countries we can't go to them and say you must stop. Only people of that country can go and say to their countries they must stop. (Gabrielle, Anglican Church)

²All interviewees are anonymised and unless otherwise specified are Ni-Vanuatu.

This approach stands in stark contrast to that of the Pacific Climate Warriors whose main action in 2014 involved doing just that which the previous participant deemed impossible: taking direct action against the Australian fossil fuel industry by blockading the world's largest coal export port in Newcastle, New South Wales, using hand crafted canoes (Fair, 2015). This suggests that the modes of agency enacted by the Warriors were at odds with some of those espoused by interlocutors in Vanuatu.

There are other ways in which faith-based apathy towards climate change could emerge. Understanding climate change as a divine rather than human matter, with prayer as the only recourse, could also result in a fatalistic apocalypticism. As a committed Ni-Vanuatu climate activist explained:

Most of the people are Christians and people believe in climate change, that climate change is happening and most of them believe that you know, it's just Jesus coming back again and it's the last days [...] And they keep on praying, praying, without doing something which is really actioning, like go plant something to stop coastal erosion and they just keep on praying. (Moses, youth climate activist)

Others also spoke of the threat apocalyptic interpretations presented to effective climate communication. Indeed, a number of participants referenced the Bible as a warning or foretelling of climate change, adopting an apocalyptic tenor. Interviewees mentioned the book of Revelations, the prophecy of the end times presented in Matthew 24, and the shocking time of Daniel 2 in relation to current and future impacts of climate change. One pastor postulated that climate change was the consequence of sin, springing from the disconnection of humanity and God, and thereby destined to end in Armageddon.

Climate change is a sign of catastrophe that has hit the world. Slowly it will increase in the sense that if we see it as a sign of the problem of sin which affects man and disconnects him from God so man becomes selfish [...] When man does not connect with God, man becomes wicked due to selfishness, then man creates a sign to show that God will be angry and destroy this world. This world will be destroyed. (Amos, SDA preacher)

Consequently, the potential links between religious understandings and failure to act due to a faith in divine intervention (or a sense of inevitable damnation) are present. Others also indicated that they suspected the Church was more preoccupied with otherworldly spiritual preparations rather than contemporary corporeal concerns, particularly in the case of certain evangelical denominations. So far, such an analysis could align with those scholars (such as Kuruppu & Liverman, 2011 or Taylor, 1999) who seem to suggest religious perspectives inhibit rather than enable proactive responses to climate change. This emphasis upon prayer rather than action, and upon spiritual futures rather than worldly presents suggests a limited political imaginary, with little room for Pacific Islanders to play an active role in the face of climate change. It seems to resonate with rather than challenge the inevitable inundation discourse.

Yet I contend that the relations between trust in the divine, prayer, and agency are far less straightforward than this. Firstly, Hereniko (2014) defends Islanders who in the face of climate change choose to place their faith in God rather than scientific research. He postulates that it is the most prudent and sensible option, given the greater dependability of God compared with the large industrialised nations who created the problem in the first place.

Secondly, denouncing prayer as a simple opposition to action does not reflect the experiences and understanding of many participants. For instance, one official from the Presbyterian Church insisted upon the importance of prayer, but also of taking responsibility for action in addition to it. He explained that for example when faced with a cyclone, one should pray to God for protection, but one must also take actions such as cutting down the trees nearest the house. One cannot simply pray, as one can depend on God excessively, and thereby fail to take responsibility for oneself. Meanwhile, in the *Pastors and Disasters* handbook, in circulation in Vanuatu at the time of my fieldwork, Archbishop Ntahoturi interprets prayer not as in opposition to or a complement to action, but as a precursor, as he recommends “praying for and receiving God’s inspiration so that people in the position of taking actions can understand what God wants them to do” (Episcopal Relief & Development, 2014, p. 13).

5 Divine warnings and the sin of carbon emissions

Turning to the second source of apathy – the idea of climate change as the fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecy – I will further unpack ideas of divine foretelling and punishment. Recognising the common understanding of climate change and Cyclone Pam as messages that encourage changes in behaviour, I consider the relationship between sin and carbon emissions. I explore the extent to which some Ni-Vanuatu take on the burden of climate change causation, and how this sense of climate sin can be situated in the wider context of perceived moral decline. I therefore highlight the generation of a political imaginary dominated by localised, individual action.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the timing of my fieldwork, discussion of warnings and prophetic signs often moved from the generality of climate change to the specificity of Cyclone Pam. Many I spoke with affirmed knowledge of the cyclone through means other than the broadcasts of the Meteorological Office. One preacher spoke of a vision of a saucepan over-boiling that she saw as a portent of a coming disaster, and another described many of the auguries witnessed in nature, from the way the clouds were flying and the appearance of unusual birds, to the rippling of the ocean, all of which he understood as God’s revelation through nature.

Linked to the recognition of these ominous signs was an emphasis on the importance of interpreting the divine significance of Pam's coming, recognising it as a holy lesson:

So, when the cyclone came and gave us a disaster, you can see that the people of Vanuatu are all over the place, because everyone understood that God had come to teach, or that God had given us a warning, that we must look at how we are living. So, we understand it that way. (Deborah, Anglican Church)

Others followed suit, interpreting the cyclone as an instruction for those in Vanuatu to change their lifestyles to be more in accordance with God's plan.

And creation being God's revelation, God is speaking to us through nature, so when Cyclone Pam strike people say, "What is God saying to us?". Maybe God is speaking to us through nature maybe because of the way we live so we need to change the way we live. (Peter, Presbyterian Church)

But what were the moral changes demanded by God, via the cyclone? This pastor proffered the examples of political corruption, homosexuality, and sex before marriage, drawing parallels between Vanuatu and Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet the same pastor also spoke of environmentally conscious behaviour changes that were required: "Don't cut down trees. Be careful with your plastics [...] carry a basket to go shopping rather than get plastics and bring pollution". Therefore, this idea of climate change and Cyclone Pam as divine imperatives for behaviour change highlights the importance of sin, particularly the sin of carbon emissions. This resonates with sermons by Fiji-based theologian Richard A. Davis. He postulates that "the rising waters causing this harm are not coming from God's hand, but through anthropogenic climate change that is the result of human sin" (Davis, 2015, p. 39) and argues that "in some ways, because humanity is implicated in the causes of climate change, it deserves the punishment of a worldwide flood [...] Some have more emissions than others do, but *all people have emissions* and many of us use beyond what is acceptable for a stable climate" (Davis, 2015, pp. 39–40; emphasis added). Thus, the language of "carbon indulgences" (Nerlich & Koteyko, 2009) with its religious connotations moves from the metaphorical to the literal.

Both this interpretation and the narrative emerging in Vanuatu, appear to align with what Rudiak-Gould (2013) has identified as a framing of "universal" climate blame. All are held equally responsible for causing and responding to climate change, while recognising that their contributions to the problem may be at different degrees of magnitude. This interpretation clearly aligned with the ethical stance of some participants:

If we say that "No, we don't make emissions", but think about when you're burning a tire how much poison is in the tire which will affect the environment [...] We all contribute to cause the climate change problem. Ah, even the human body produces heat, yes it produces heat and it is good heat that's coming out of the body. But otherwise we all con-

tribute one way or another, maybe in the islands small scale and in bigger countries bigger scale. (Amos, SDA preacher)

Linked to this was a refusal to direct accusations of blame at the larger industrialised countries, and thus a rejection of a model of “industrial blame” as Rudiak-Gould (2013) categorises it. There is a clear pragmatism to this argument – that apportioning blame solely to the Global North has been ineffective – yet it also stands in stark contrast to, for example, the antagonistic politics of blame enacted by the Pacific Climate Warriors with respect to Australia and its coal barges. Others sympathised with this position, with for instance one pastor explaining “we can point fingers at people, but four fingers will always come back to you”. These sentiments suggest that Vanuatu could be legitimately pointed at in terms of climate change responsibility, a notion that may be at odds with historic emissions records but not with the attitude of many participants.

And many of those spreading these messages of the absolution of carbon sin through sustainable actions clearly practised what they preached. For instance, one NGO worker spoke proudly of the changes she had made to her own lifestyle:

Using my own basket like when I go down to the shop or to the market, thinking “I have to take my own bag”, put in all the foods that I want, not taking too much plastic to go home [...] and also one another thing is sometimes I decide to walk, going back home, just for a short distance, don’t need bus, I have to walk and one other action that I have like growing my own food. (Abigail, NGO worker)

Meanwhile a public official spoke of how she had embraced green technologies at home in the form of solar power, and reframed many of the domestic features of her life that are common across Ni-Vanuatu households (such as not using a fridge or electric heater) as forms of sustainable living. However, some strongly disagreed with the emphasis upon Islander mitigation as a practical or ethical response to the climate crisis. One NGO worker criticised the hypocrisies present in climate change communication:

We have taken almost two times a plane to say that and then we will blame somebody that normally walks by foot, but he takes three times a year a truck. It’s kind of stupid [...] So, yeah, I’m not really comfortable to blame the people who have really small impact and this kind of stuff. (David, ex-patriate NGO worker)

This highlights questions raised by Agrawal and Narain (2012) about the failures to distinguish between “luxury emissions” compared with “survival emissions”: the emissions Pacific Island villagers produce in order to meet their basic needs are put on a par with high-carbon Western consumerist lifestyles. In this narrative of sin and universal responsibility it seems the wider injustices, the disproportionate nature of the causes and consequences of greenhouse gas emissions are at danger of being overlooked, as industrial nations are not held thoroughly to account for their actions.

While this religious-political imaginary may be incompatible with mainstream climate justice narratives of historic responsibility and colonial legacies, it still offers possibilities for rethinking notions of ethics and agency in response to climate change. This narrative of Islander responsibility centres Islander agency rather than the responsibility and capacities of distant and more heavily polluting nations. Hereniko shares this view, arguing that the damage that Islanders have caused to their island environments and the carbon dioxide emissions that Oceania is responsible for need to be considered. In doing so, Islanders are able to act, rather than action just being the prerogative of bigger continental states. He declares that “the sooner we realise that we are also contributors to our own demise, the sooner we will empower ourselves to be part of the solution and not part of the problem” (2014, p. 234). Rudiak-Gould (2015, p. 58) echoes the agentic potential of having carbon sin, as he argues that “innocence implies impotence”.

Indeed, as Rudiak-Gould (2014) has comparably highlighted with respect to understandings of universal climate blame in the Marshall Islands, there is a great sense of empowerment to be found with the solutions to climate change being in local rather than distant foreign hands. As one NGO worker who was taking positive sustainable steps in her own life and with her community explained:

It gives me strength like I'm not waiting, I'm not depending on [...] like individual people can do something to reduce their own emissions and everybody, it's everybody's business to adjust their own lifestyle and it gives me strength to influence [...] that strength can help me and my family and other people in my community that we can do something and we do something. (Abigail, NGO worker)

As Hulme (2009) has highlighted, climate change can be mobilised in support of a multitude of ideological projects. Consequently, this sense of collective responsibility for climate change becomes more comprehensible through a framework of wider moral decline, again a parallel with Rudiak-Gould's (2012) work in the Marshall Islands. In a process he refers to as “promiscuous corroboration”, explanations for socio-cultural changes are brought under the umbrella of anthropogenic climate change in locally meaningful ways. As one pastor explained, the failure to enact these more sustainable lifestyle practices, for example through littering, leads to a despoiling of creation and a failure of stewardship.

We see that many things are coming and before Vanuatu was just natural. When a leaf falls it rots, but plastic cannot rot, metal cannot rot. With good life, easy life it has implications as well. There are impacts that will hit us hard if we are not careful. We have to properly dispose plastics, tins that we use. Care for the environment because when we do, the environment will help us. Without that, the environment can become our enemy. That's probably why our world is changing, and climate change is happening. We will ask why? God has created it perfectly, but we humans maybe are not careful. (Amos, SDA preacher)

A thread that connects these concerns is that of a systematic movement away from both devout Christian practice and the maintenance of *kastom* traditions, and in its place the adoption of a Western selfish individualism.

In Vanuatu's context before, people lived together and shared things in common, everything is under the chief's authority but today different cultures have come, many different attitudes changing the mentality of man. It makes man more individualistic. So, man becomes more self-centred. He wants this and that. He wants a truck, a good house, he wants everything [...] So people are yes, compared to before, people nowadays only want things for themselves. (Amos, SDA preacher)

While this critique was levelled at Ni-Vanuatu society in general, accusations were particularly targeted at young people who were living in urban areas, rather than remaining on their islands of origin and contributing to the agricultural work of the family. This concern about moral decline in Vanuatu, including the loss of respect for elders and move away from *kastom* practices is well documented (Mitchell, 2011; Taylor, 2016b). At the centre of this repeated refrain, that chastises the population for letting go of their traditional knowledge and their resilience, and succumbing instead to the dependency and lethargy of Western lifestyles, was a yearning for a future past. One NGO worker put it bluntly:

It's the attitude of the people. I think it's just the people, they need to be trained to go back to the way our ancestors were living before. Make their own gardens. We have more and more youth in town. What are they doing here? Nothing [...] We are lazy, sorry to say that, but it's true. In fact, in the island I think people are sitting there crying "we have no food because of Pam". Pam just came in. Our attitude of making gardening and drinking kava and then during the day we sit, relax, we waste a lot of time, when we should be out there in the bush. Pam just came in and addressed the issue that yes, we are not working hard enough, like our ancestors. So, I think for me, I think, there needs to be a lot of awareness, for people to start going back to the garden to olden days. (Phoebe, NGO worker)

There is an undeniable romanticism to this vision of better times before. Moreover, climate change and extreme weather events have moved beyond a purely scientific domain of causation and consequence, and are made locally meaningful through being situated within this pre-existing moral framework. This moral dilemma between 'tradition' and 'modernity' played out throughout discussions of Cyclone Pam. As just one example, of the thankfully few deaths that happened during the cyclone, many were reportedly caused by flying iron sheeting, torn from the roofs. In many accounts I heard of those, responsibility was not centred on the relationship between excessive emissions in faraway countries and increases in extreme weather events, but the failure to keep *kastom*. *Kastom* thatched houses are not deadly if they collapse in high winds, whereas those who had perished in the cyclone had become literal victims of Westernisation and its dangerous and unstable concrete houses.

In this context religious perspectives have the potential to problematise the anthropogenic dimension of climate change, as while both Ni-Vanuatu and natural scientific accounts align regarding human responsibility for global warming, but disagree regarding *which* human actions have caused it (Chua & Fair, 2019). This raises the question of whether it is a case of religious infraction, cultural corruption, or excessive carbon emissions, and to what extent these different narratives of causation converge or diverge from each other.

It must be recognised that this discourse of local responsibility reflects a wider sentiment: Vanuatu becomes the centre not just of the problem but also the solution. Naomi Klein (2014) envisions climate change as an unrivalled opportunity for positive social transformation. Within Vanuatu it became evident that climate change was an opportunity to articulate the importance of indigenous knowledge, the practical and moral superiority of Ni-Vanuatu *kastom* practices, Christian forms of connection and care for nature and community, and potentially advocate for a renaissance of pre-capitalist values and forms of livelihood, in the face of increasing urbanisation and Westernisation. This mirrors Rudiak-Gould's argument that emphasising local responsibility for climate change as a means of reinforcing existing cultural narratives "carries postcolonial and counterhegemonic potentialities of its own" (Rudiak-Gould, 2014, p. 367), and highlights the potential for Islander agency at the heart of these religious perspectives.

6 Divine accompaniment and the rejection of retributive suffering

Finally, this relationship between climate change and sin can be approached from a different perspective, one that still emphasises agency and a focus on worldly actions in the present, but which geographically extends its concerns beyond Oceania's responsibility to adapt to and mitigate climate change, and local attempts to restore a former moral order. I highlight ideas of divine accompaniment (faith that God is always by one's side), and in doing so I problematise the retributive suffering implied by discourses of carbon sin. Instead, I emphasise injustice, and the moral responsibility of those nations historically and currently to blame for the greatest proportion of carbon emissions.

Upolu Vaai (2015), in his work on Samoan embodied theology, contends that a common misreading of the Noah story is that there will be no more floods. Instead, God is promising through his rainbow to be with humankind in their suffering, and it has pained Him to unleash such suffering upon his creation through the flood. This message of divine accompaniment, of God being beside Pacific Islanders in this time of trouble, resonated with the sentiments of many Ni-Vanuatu pastors. For instance, one Catholic priest spoke of using Luke 8, the story of Jesus and his disciples crossing a tumultuous lake, in order to help his parishioners understand climate change. He explained:

It's that at bad times or good times, He is still with you. He won't let you go. Because sometimes, we feel like He has abandoned us. But He is still there. Like in this boat, as it is going to sink, the disciples are leaving the boat, but He is still there. So whatever situation they are in, He is with them. (Joel, Catholic preacher)

Cyclone Pam was also addressed in a similar manner. One parishioner relayed the metaphor his preacher had used – that of a tree that stands – to recognise the place of God alongside those in struggle. It was the tree that had lost all its branches, yet still stood, that had felt the full force of the cyclone, compared to that which had been uprooted. Thus, in order to endure a cyclone one just needed to be firmly rooted in faith. With the lack of action and fatalism this could potentially engender, this reaffirms the tension between trust in the divine and action, as previously discussed.

And this sense that God was beside them during troubling times was something a number of participants shared in terms of their own experiences of the cyclone. The same parishioner described how his faith had kept him and his family safe during the height of the winds.

Right throughout the night I was walking around the room praying and everyone was sleeping. And I said, "I need you guys to join me in faith" and we were going to go through the cyclone with God. And we did not receive a scratch on the house. The roof, nothing. (Elijah, former government official)

Indeed, one preacher attributed her survival to direct divine intervention.

I said "God, you look for a small place like this, and you will protect me, give me a way out". When I said that, I saw that the word of God came to me then. He said, "You're going to be out". He opened the back door; the door was heavy because the wind was strong. The door came out, I fell down with it. It threw me down. When it threw me down I went under a small roof like that one and I said "God, you don't take out this one. You leave this one like it is". So, this place, like I said, it stands to this day, right there. (Gabrielle, Anglican Church)

This sentiment of recognising God's protective presence during struggle was also shared by many of the Pacific Climate Warriors in the run-up to their canoe flotilla, during which they blockaded coal ships in Newcastle Harbour, New South Wales, for eight hours. Their protest encompassed both the importance of prayer and trust in the divine but as tied to climate change belief, and emphasised worldly agency, yet laid moral responsibility at the feet of the industrialised nations, rather than Pacific Islanders themselves.

One Warrior spoke of her lack of fear due to the confidence that God was beside them, in their boats.

I believe that God will go with us, yeah. So, nothing will happen to me. (Priscilla, 350 Solomon Islands)

Situating the Pacific Climate Warriors' protest within wider social movement literature, the notion that God accompanies activists in their struggles resonates with Skrimshire's (2008) analysis of faith in environmental protest groups in the UK. He argues that direct action³ involves both practical risk, such as the possibility of arrest or injury (which the Warriors certainly faced), as well as epistemological risk, as participants are inevitably acting under a condition of uncertainty regarding the scale and timing of climate impacts. He contends that given this uncertainty direct action therefore requires faith: faith not in the security of religious salvation, but in the value of ongoing human life. Skrimshire's words are valuable here, as Pacific Islander activists face far greater climate uncertainty than their UK counterparts. However, I reject the secular binary Skrimshire presents: the Warriors demonstrate that one can act buoyed by faith both in the value of life and in salvation.

For many Warriors, the sense that God was on their side also dovetailed with an understanding that through their action they were doing God's work, recognising their climate activism as a form of spiritual devotion. One of the Warriors spoke of how through his involvement in 350 Pacific he felt certain that God had a plan for him that he was now able to fulfil, and another echoed similar thoughts, interpreting climate change as a righteous challenge that brought the Warriors together.

Fusi, a Tuvaluan theological scholar, also concurs with some dimensions of this. He suggests that the people of Tuvalu must begin "protesting against injustices in the governments of the world and the ways of the big and rich nations" (Fusi, 2005, pp. 31–32), but sees these acts of challenging injustice as a form of repentance and renewing of relations with God, and thereby living in a more godly way, again suggesting that climate activism can be a realisation of one's duty to God in the world.

As well as demonstrating how trust in God (via faith in divine accompaniment) can combine with action, and highlighting how climate activism can be interpreted as a form of spiritual devotion, this approach also challenges the narrative of sin presented in the previous section. Following Lusama (2007), I argue that this moves away from a retributive model of suffering (suffering as a deserved punishment) and instead attributes sin to those causing climate change on a global scale.

Lusama (2007) argues that those currently most affected by climate change, such as those in Tuvalu, are the poor and the marginalised, not the wrongdoers. This is thus at odds with a retributive theory of suffering (Lusama, 2004, p. 23). The reverend rejects the minimal emissions of the atoll state as justification of their predicament, in clear contradiction to the universal carbon sin narrative, contending that

³Direct action refers to political acts that attempt a direct intervention in the cause of a problem – such as through reducing emissions by blocking coal ships – rather than petitioning others to act on one's behalf.

the people of Tuvalu have no part at all in the sin that brought about global warming and its negative impacts. They are so innocent that to believe that they have been punished for being innocent is impossible to comprehend. (Lusama, 2007, p. 23)

Indeed, in a more extended piece, Lusama (2004, p. 6) articulates a systemic critique of capitalism, globalisation, and consumption as the root causes of climate change, arguing that “lying behind this problem of global warming and sea level rise are the major systems of injustice that serves only the good of a few powerful in the whole world”. This is mirrored by Davis (2015, p. 39), who despite emphasising the sin of Islanders, is also adamant that “capitalist greed, originally and primarily of the West but now extending its tentacles over the whole globe, with its continued and ever more aggressive violations of mother Earth is what lies behind climate change”. Returning to the previous emphasis upon moral decline in Vanuatu, these different moral outlooks have a clear point of convergence: both highlight the selfishness and greed of Western consumerist lifestyles. However, the previous perspective emphasises the impacts of these at their most marginal outposts – Pacific Islands – whereas this interpretation highlights the source.

Fusi (2005) argues that the innocence of the Pacific Islands with respect to carbon sin and the suffering they endure actually gives them a stronger voice. He contends:

We will never be silenced even if we sink. Our sinking itself will amplify our voice in urging the nations and peoples of the world as a whole to do something about the global warming before it is too late. (Fusi, 2005, p. 46)

Rethinking the Pacific Climate Warriors’ slogan “not drowning but fighting”, Fusi’s (2005) stance seems to be that “in our drowning, we are fighting”. His analysis also echoes yet inverts Farbotko’s (2010) concept of “wishful sinking”. Fusi (2005, p. 42) suggests that climate change is a holy message to the world that is articulated through the loss of Tuvalu, as it is “God’s will and purpose, making Tuvalu become landless so that the world may be saved from worse situations in the future caused by global warming”. Here, instead of a passive sacrifice that demonstrates the severity of climate change (“wishful sinking”), Tuvalu is presented as a martyr, acting for the sake of the globe and portraying Tuvalu in an almost Christ-like position.

Indeed, for Lusama it is the figure of Jesus, not Noah (see Fair, 2018), who sheds most light on the situation, as Jesus’s death epitomises the undeserved suffering, such as those in Tuvalu now face, and demonstrates that God is by the side of those who are so afflicted, reaffirming the emphasis upon divine accompaniment. Moreover, he invokes the figure of Christ as a rallying cry for Islander-led justice, arguing that “Tuvalu, though small in size and population, has the obligation to stand for justice, this is the lesson we learned from the Cross” (Lusama, 2007, p. 23). He suggests that blaming some humans, rather than God, for climate

change, enables us to fight with rather than against God, in opposition to systems of oppression and inequality.

Therefore, in this rejection of local blame and pinpointing of the sin of industrialised nations, this emphasis upon divine accompaniment provides a religious basis for political action that directly confronts those most responsible for carbon emissions, as is manifested in the case of the Pacific Climate Warriors. It returns to the question of trust in the divine raised at the opening of the chapter and incorporates that into a call to action: one can have faith in God's presence despite the unjust suffering caused by climate change.

7 Conclusion

This variety of religious perspectives on climate change from Vanuatu and the broader Pacific Island region suggests that we should reject the “purification” of religious and scientific perspectives (Kempf, 2017) and instead embrace the heterogeneity of religious understandings (Hulme, 2017). None of the perspectives explored are inimical to a focus upon Islander agency, yet they present relationships between trust in the divine and action in highly contrasting ways. They combine spiritual faith with a belief in scientific prediction, yet reach different conclusions regarding appropriate courses of action. While the emphasis upon divine accompaniment encourages political action oriented towards the major polluting nations, the narratives of universal carbon sin correspond with more local and self-directed efforts. Although an exclusive emphasis upon prayer or punishment does hold the potential for fatalism and apathy, these religious approaches are compatible with and in many cases actively enable proactive examples of climate change adaptation and mitigation, be it clearing nearby trees in preparation for a cyclone, minimising plastic waste, or demanding greater action on the part of carbon-intensive nations. Overall, I contend that religious perspectives are not antithetical to expressions of agency and that actors across the Pacific are showing considerable enthusiasm for combining religious thought and climate change messaging (Fair, 2018, p. 8). Consequently, the project of spiritualising climate change must be recognised as integral to both effective climate change communication in the Pacific (Nunn, 2017) and to articulating an alternative, more empowering framing of climate change and Oceania that resists the discourse of inevitable inundation.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a 1+3 Economic and Social Research Council postgraduate studentship (award number ES/J500185/1), held at University College London, Department of Geography. I am indebted to all the friends and participants in Vanuatu and Australia who generously shared their insights with me, and

to 350 Vanuatu and GIZ for hosting me during my fieldwork. Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed and helpful comments.

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