

Losing Faith in Development? The role of religion in a post-disaster environment.

Kate Bronnimann, Honours Dissertation



Abstract

Moving out of the private sphere and re-entering the public imaginary, the world is experiencing a 'religious resurgence'. In the mainstream there has been a 'religious turn' toward a rapprochement with religious actors. For a long time, faith-based actors and institutions were unacknowledged in mainstream development projects. This has been attributed to secular discourses of modernity, as well as harmful views and practices promoted by certain religious institutions. However, religious institutions have a long history of development, particularly in the Pacific. The role of religion in the Pacific is complex, but is still important for many people. During Cyclone Winston and in the recovery process that follows religious beliefs gave strength and comfort, as well as alternate interpretations of disaster. Looking forward to the future and addressing issues such as climate change adaptation require collaboration between different institutions, both secular and religious, as well as incorporating local beliefs and epistemologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Moving out of the private sphere and re-entering the public imaginary, the world is experiencing a 'religious resurgence'. In many regions of the world, religion arguably appears to be declining. However, for much of the developing world, it remains part of the quotidian landscape, although in ever changing manifestations. In the mainstream development industry, Fountain, Kindon & Murray (2004) identified a 'religious turn' toward a rapprochement with religious actors. The precise reasons for this are many and various, including recognition of the enduring role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) within communities since colonial times. One broad suggestion by Haynes (2007) relates to the deep questioning of a secular view of development, which espoused modernist utopias. However, for any kind of development intervention to be useful to the people involved, requires a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the local environment, including the spiritual context. This opens up the need for new dialogues between advocates and practitioners of 'secular' development and those working from faith-based agendas.

For a long time, faith-based actors and institutions were unacknowledged in mainstream development projects. This was in one sense attributed to the modernist belief that religious beliefs would wane as societies 'developed' (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011). At the same time, religious institutions have been known to promote beliefs and practices that impact the development and human rights of certain groups (de Kadt, 2009; Lunn, 2009). The rise of religious fundamentalisms, across various faiths, are a continual threat to minority groups, such as the LGBTIQI community, and to women's bodily autonomy (Imam, 2016). Yet, whether formally acknowledged or not, faith-based organisations have continued to deliver basic social services, such as education and health care. This has been especially evident in the Pacific (Thornton, Sakai & Hassall, 2012).

Many communities and individuals remain marginalised by global economic shocks, vulnerable to a range of violent and political cultural

practices, as well as increases in volatile weather events, due to climate change. The post-structural critique of mainstream, modernist development argues that while a discourse of economic salvation has been promoted, a neoliberal approach has clearly failed to address development challenges (Escobar, 1995). Modernist visions of linear progress have been modified with the understanding that a more holistic approach to development is needed, that engages with different world views and upholds respect for human rights. Many alternatives of development have been considered, such as 'community based' development, 'ethno' development, or the concept of *buen vivir* (good living, living well) that seek to "broaden the horizon to include multiple contextualised alternatives" (Villalba, 2013, p.1428) and challenge the neoliberal paradigm. However, another avenue, that includes religious actors, is now being explored. In 1998, the World Faiths Development Dialogue, was formed by James Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, and Lord George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury. This, along with other research conducted by both academics and government branches (Marshall, 2013), sought to explore "the potential for dynamic alliances between organisations and worlds that have heretofore often viewed one another with apprehension" (Keough & Marshall, 2004, p.3).

Despite the opening up of the development space to include other actors, it remains to be seen if FBOs offer a comparative advantage in the development field (Tomalin, 2012). Whether or not religion and religious actors are the missing link in the development puzzle, "many religions offer narratives for understanding and interpreting the natural world... especially after disasters" (Joakim & White, 2015, p.193). I am interested in how people *experience* their faith (Baldacchino & Kahn, 2011) particularly when faced with a traumatic experience, such as a natural disaster. Through an exploratory case study on an indigenous community in Fiji I will consider what role religion plays in the wake of a natural disaster. How do people's religious beliefs influence the interpretation of traumatic events and does faith in God provide a form of inner strength?

What's more, how can religious beliefs inform the way people respond and adapt to climate induced natural disasters?

There has already been a lot written on the role of religion in Fiji, particularly Tomlinson's work on the Methodist Church (See Tomlinson 2004; 2009; 2015 inter alia). However, he approaches it from an anthropological perspective and therefore does not focus on the potential role that religious institutions can play in community development. Issues around gender have also been an important area of scholarly enquiry as evidenced by Leckie's (2005) extensive bibliography. However, little has been written specifically on religious beliefs during times of natural disaster.

Beginning with a review of the literature, I will then draw on an exploratory case study into an indigenous¹ community in Viti Levu, Fiji. By engaging with the works of indigenous scholars of Fiji, as well the experiences of Cyclone Winston, as described by the community, I will analyse alternative conceptions of disaster response and adaptation. Cyclone Winston was one of the strongest cyclones globally and is widely considered to be the worst natural disasters that Fiji has faced in the last hundred years. Almost all the villagers we spoke to claimed it was the strongest storm in their living memory and that it caused a lot of fear and confusion. For many, their spiritual relationship with God provided comfort and meaning, both during the storm and in the process of recovery.

I will begin with a review of the literature before examining in more detail the role that religious institutions have played in the wider Oceanic region and Fiji itself. Moving onto a discussion of religion in a post-disaster community, I will examine how religious beliefs influence the meaning attributed to Cyclone Winston. I will end with a discussion of

¹ I use the term Indigenous Fijian to refer to the first inhabitants of the Fijian islanders. Though the word iTaukei is also used to refer to indigenous Fijians, it is somewhat contentious, being tied to the nationalist and exclusionary ethnic Fijian movement.

how religious beliefs and indigenous epistemologies can be incorporated into disaster recovery processes and inform the ongoing discussion around climate change.

1. INTO A POST-SECULAR WORLD

Secular and development discourses are similar in their discursive constructions of neutrality. Escobar's (1995) seminal work *Encountering Development*, is key in exposing the discourse of mainstream development that is rooted in imperial and colonial rhetoric. He argues that the development industry has constructed knowledge about the world, under the guise of truth, to ensure its hegemonic view of progress endures. Similarly, the political ideology of secularism "shapes the production of knowledge" (Fountain, 2013b, p.311) and imagines that "the most neutral or objective position for enquiry is that of the agnostic or atheist" (*ibid*, p.314). This has created oppositional spheres of developed and un(der)developed, secular and religious, with progress, modernity and rationality being associated with the former and tradition, backwardness and spirituality associated with the latter.

Building from a post-development stance, I adopt a post-secular approach (see Fountain, 2013b). The post-secular is not a wholesale rejection of secular public space nor a de-privatisation of religion. Rather, it is a recognition of difference and an awareness of the ideological bias beneath 'neutral' secular space. Decolonising Western, secular knowledge allows different epistemologies and experiences to be heard. Graham (2012) describes the post-secular as a "'third space' between secular reason and religious revival...[that] causes us to re-evaluate the uncritical hegemony of secular reason" (p.242). The critical, reflexivity of the post-secular seeks a more nuanced approach, understanding "the ways in which religion continues to be an inhibiting force...as well as a powerful source of agency" (*ibid*, p.244).

It is worth noting that a post-secular framing for Fiji is not unproblematic. It assumes that the secular has been uniformly

experienced. However, the geography of place impacts religious and secular narratives. Kong (2010) warns against a universal application of a post-secular discourse and argues that often “what we are witnessing as ‘resurgent’ religious practices...are...[in fact] an abiding spirituality that has persisted in the face of modernity” (p.765). Fiji is constitutionally secular but, since being introduced, Christianity has been closely tied to traditional chiefly structures, as well as national identity politics (Lawson, 1997). Although part of a global, post-secular world, the Fijian state has seen less of a “religious revival” than other developing countries and more of a continuing presence of the church at every level of life, from the state, to the community, to the household (Ryle, 2010).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Development as a field of study and institutional practice has existed since the end of World War Two, but development as a particular kind of relationship between the West and the rest has a far longer trajectory. The discourse and practice of mainstream development studies promoted by Western governments and the Bretton Woods institutions inter alia, has its roots in colonialism (Rist, 2014; Kothari, 2005). The traditional rubric of modernism and economic development was driven by the secular countries of Western Europe and the United States, who saw “religion as irrelevant to modern societies and a constraint on progress” (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011, p.45). This led to religion being neglected in development studies under the assumption that developing nations would slowly move away from traditional beliefs and practices as they entered the ‘modern world.’ The secular maligning of religion followed a pattern of nineteenth Century colonialism that sought to transform undesirable practices of local populations (Ager & Ager, 2011). However, this belief was more a reflection of Western thought than on the material reality in developing countries.

Ver Beek (2000) argues that the relationship between ‘spirituality’ and development has been ignored by both development institutions and

influential organisations. The failure of mainstream development to recognise “the centrality of...spirituality ultimately robs the poor of opportunities to tap into whatever strength, power and hope that this dimension gives them” (p.31). While Ver Beek is correct in highlighting the importance that religion continues to play in the lives of people in developing countries (as well as the ‘secular’ West), he perhaps places too much importance on religious beliefs. Though religion remains woven into the everyday life of many, it is only one factor influencing action and informing identity. Ver Beek’s instrumental view that sees spiritual belief as an under-utilised resource, is an approach that many adopt.

Defining religion is not easy and its complexity has meant that much of the literature has been “instrumental, narrow or normative” (Jones and Petersen, 2011). The “religious turn” (Fountain, et al., 2004) in the development field has come from within the institutions themselves, rather than from academia. Faith-based organisations and religious institutions have been explicitly included in the development dialogue since around 1998 and their potential in achieving global development outcomes explored. Haynes (2007) and Keough & Marshall (2004) write on the possible benefits of a relationship between secular and faith-based development organisations. They paint both these groups as homogenous and harmonious, with a common enemy (poverty) and common base (human rights). However, reality defies such a simplistic rendering. Both conflate religion with religious institutions, which are viewed instrumentally, as part of a wider development toolkit, for achieving specific outcomes. This ignores the contextual complexities in which religion and religious practices exist.

Tadros (2015) argues that development has shifted from ignoring religion altogether to framing it as a homogenous entity, and a primary signifier of identity. This creates binary categories of religious and non-religious and assumes people inhabit one or the other. Gokal (2006) hopes it is possible to move beyond such binaries and ‘reclaim’ religion. Through inhabiting a ‘quasi-identity’ of religiosity, women, in particular,

are able to challenge the extreme tendencies of certain religions. Lunn (2009) adopts a critical theory framework to analyse the role that religion plays. She calls for a holistic form of development that integrates the sacred and secular and moves away from dichotomies of belief. In imagining a palatable middle ground between secularism and religion to challenge the binary discourse, Lunn constructs yet another category where the best of both worlds are combined into a happy marriage of complementary beliefs.

In his critique of three key development texts, Fountain (2013a) argues that religion is constructed as “transcultural and ahistorical, clearly identified and distinct” (p.23). He argues that in creating a ‘myth’ of religious NGOs as separate from more traditionally secular development actors “consequently, imagines and entrenches dominant secular ideologies as normal, neutral and morally superior” (p.11). However, secular and religious spaces and identities are intertwined and not so easily delineated. While it is important not to paint religion with broad brushstrokes, assuming that all of development subscribes to this belief is equally problematic. While there will always be some sort of ideology behind both religious and secular development efforts, these are ever shifting and changing.

The belief that religion has intrinsic values and morals that are useful for human development has endured. According to Narayanan (2013), religion offers a space for informing values, fostering activism and encouraging self-development. Adopting a human rights based approach, Tomalin (2006) argues that there is an “overlapping consensus” between a Western human rights discourse and religious social ethics that can provide common ground between the two. Deneulin (2013) believes that ‘Christian’ values are embodied in the actions of both religious and non-religious actors. This normative assumption of a universal set of moral beliefs, found across all religions, erroneously ignores local contexts and histories. It also seems to suggest that morals are a construction of

religious institutions rather than something intrinsic to humans, regardless of their spiritual beliefs.

It is important to move away from essentialising and universal taxonomies of religion and development towards a more context driven, interpretive approach. Deneulin & Rakodi (2011) show the lack of research into the meaning religion holds for people themselves. They argue: "the task for development research is to understand how religious discourses are embodied in certain social practices, how social and historical processes have led to that particular embodiment, and how the religion itself redefines its discourse and practice, in the light of changing social, economic and political contexts" (p.51). Mee (2016) furthers this argument, adopting a social life approach that shifts the analysis away from institutions and onto people's relationship to religion. Implicit in this is the recognition that religion is not a fixed identity but is fluid and discursive and manifested differently through each individual. For Devine & Deneulin (2011) religion is inseparable from day to day life and that people make decisions "in the complex space that lies between what is 'normative' (what God commands) and the 'everyday'" (p.74). Religion is not only concerned with the transcendental but co-exists and is entangled in lived reality.

The recently published *Religion, and the Politics of Development* explores the religion-politics-development nexus (Fountain, Bush, & Feener, 2015). They describe a 'politics of hope' where "hope becomes the foundation upon which visions for alternative futures are constructed, disseminated, advocated and enacted" (p.26). This definition does not seek to define what hope or the perfect vision is but instead understands that the arena of religion, politics and development are all tied into the ideologically laden project of hope promotion. Far from being separate entities, these three spheres overlap and intersect, challenging the notion of the secular. One important aspect that is missing is an engagement with religion and gender issues. Only one out of the ten chapters features a discussion of gender and religion. A focus on religion, development and

politics must take into account how each of these areas impact gendered relationships, roles and responsibilities.

The rise of religious fundamentalisms has brought renewed attention to the negative impact that powerful religious ideologies can have on women's bodies (Imam, 2016). Yet to assume that religious beliefs and gender equality are mutually exclusive is far from accurate. In *Gender, Faith and Development* the notion of 'religious feminism' is explored. This expands feminism beyond a secular, Western model and seeks new ways to interpret religious texts that offer their own forms of empowerment (Tomalin, 2011). The tension between religious beliefs and women's rights is an important area to be explored. Shaheed (2012) argues against cultural relativism, claiming that religious and other cultural rights must be respected, so long as they do not impinge on human rights, particularly those of women.

Much of the literature raises the question of how the development industry should engage with religious institutions or FBOs. One difficulty highlighted is, that while the term 'faith-based organisation' may imply homogeneity, there is incredible diversity within this (Ferris, 2011). Ware, Ware & Clarke (2016) broadly define it as an organisation that is shaped and driven by a particular faith, or interpretation of that faith. Other authors have created typologies that attempt to place FBOs within certain distinct categories (G. Clarke, 2006; M. Clarke & Ware, 2015). This includes organisations where faith plays a small role in their activities through to groups with a distinct religious imperative, including mission work or even illegal activities (G. Clarke, 2006). This creates artificial and objective groupings that provide a useful short hand, but are not an accurate reflection of reality, where boundaries between groups are far more blurred.

Benedetti (2006) has cautioned against simplistic categories, arguing "the distinction between faith-based NGOs is better understood as a continuum". For Tomalin (2012) categories are less important than who such typologies are for and how they shape engagement. She argues "the

way the term is understood by donors reflects its genesis in a North American context" (p.693) and that there is a distinct Western, Christian bias. Although mainstream development actors and government have shown increase interest in FBOs, it has largely been directed towards Christian organisations within Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and North Asia (G. Clarke, 2007). Such a narrow focus ignores the diversity of faiths found within the regions of South Asia and the Middle East, and reflects the wariness donors have around engaging with Muslim non-government organisations (De Cordier, 2009a; De Cordier, 2009b) . What is more troubling is while FBOs are scrutinised and divided into arbitrary categories, secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not. This implies these institutions are neutral, homogenous entities whose values and motivations do not need to be studied or challenged.

Adopting economic terminology, FBOs' advantages are transformed into assets. Berger (2003) argues that FBOs have "social capital", utilising their moral influence to motivate, inspire and mobilise local communities. The question of what value FBOs offer, is investigated by James (2011), as though it were a measurable input. He argues "inclusion, stewardship, generosity, integrity, compassion and justice provide an essential alternative approach to development" (p.112). Yet these positive attributes are also found within secular development work. A belief in universal morals, with their foundation in religion, is seen as a motivation for development work. Yet many non-religious actors work within the development industry, driven by their own morals and values that may not be derived from personal faith.

The move from "estrangement to engagement" (G. Clarke, 2007) recognises there is already a long history of religiously motivated charity and development work (Leurs, 2012). Though strongest in the areas of health and education, religious groups have also been involved in political movements, advocacy for the poor and peace building (Berger, 2003). FBOs are said to have distinct characteristics that give them an advantage over secular institutions when undertaking development work. Faith

institutions are “embedded” in local communities (M. Clarke & Ware, 2015), able to utilise religious networks at both the local and international level (Leurs, 2012). Faith plays an important role in the daily lives of many communities and therefore FBOs are seen as more trustworthy (Sakai, 2012) and with greater local knowledge than secular or international NGOs. However, as Tomalin (2012) points out, there is little empirical evidence to back up these claims.

Tausch et al. (2011) show how, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, religious beliefs and rituals, such as prayer, as well as shared faith with the wider community, helped “transform the epic disasters...into personal challenges” (p.248). This allowed survivors to accept and adapt to the situation they found themselves in. Resilience is ubiquitous in disaster discourse and religious beliefs are argued to provide a form of spiritual resilience (J. Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, & Ager, 2015; Cheema, Scheyvens, Glavovic, & Imran, 2014; Fountain, Kindon, & Murray, 2004). This resilience can be through a personal relationship with God (Alawiyah, Bell, Pyles, & Runnels, 2011) or through more practical strategies. The shared spaces of local faith communities can promote resilience by developing disaster risk reduction strategies, being a point of first response immediately after a disaster and offering both material and spiritual support (Rivera & Nickels, 2014). Isolated, rural communities are particularly vulnerable and often difficult to reach after natural disasters. Places of worship can provide emergency shelter, distribute aid and provide information (Wisner, 2010).

The embeddedness of local faith communities means they are sometimes more attuned to local needs than international humanitarian agencies. Ager et al. (2015) show how Muslim women affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami were upset that emergency relief kits did not include headscarves. National and international responses to disaster often ignore the role that local faith institutions can play, for fear of violating humanitarian ideals of neutrality and impartiality (De Cordier, 2009a). Yet as McGregor (2010) argues “most, if not all, development

encounters have religious consequences and meanings, including the activities of avowedly secular organisations” (p.730). In post-tsunami Aceh, he shows how top-down transnational aid chains failed to respond to local spiritual needs by stipulating that no aid be allocated for rebuilding religious spaces.

An under researched area is how religious responses to disaster are often gendered and exclusionary. Fountain et al. (2004) explore the role that churches played in Papua New Guinea after the Aitape tsunami. Though they filled a gap in the government’s response, they found the organisational structure of churches was largely male dominated with women only playing a “peripheral role” (p.335). Conversely, Cheema et al. (2014) explain that in the aftermath of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake mosques were a site to meet and disseminate information, yet this was only directed towards men. Secular and religious responses must be sensitive to religious beliefs and, at the same time, be inclusive to both men and women.

The majority of the literature exploring the intersection of faith and development is concentrated in Africa, Asia and to a lesser extent, Latin America. The Pacific region is largely absent. The development journals *Gender and Development*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Development and Development in Practice* all devoted special issues to the topic of religion and development. Out of the 58 articles written, the Pacific region only featured once (and only as part of a greater focus on Asia and the Pacific). This lack of engagement is confounding “given the wide recognition of the role that churches play in this arena” (Fountain et al., 2004).

What has been written from a development perspective focuses on the way church and state in the Pacific are closely linked and how religious institutions often fill gaps in areas with weak governance (Hassall, 2012). They can also act as conduit between local communities and the government in areas where state presence may be remotely felt or during “situations of fragility” (Hauck, 2010, p.62). Hauck shows how,

in Papua New Guinea, churches and other religious community groups drew upon their 'social capital' to strengthen governance and enhance capabilities.

Religious institutions can also be a point of contact between NGOs and local populations. As M. Clarke (2013) asserts, "sacred space...[is] development space" and can be more gender inclusive than traditional arenas, such as *nakmal*, in Vanuatu. It is not clear, however, whether religious institutions are better positioned to achieve development goals, or if certain groups are excluded. Fostering dialogue between governments, NGOs and FBOs is important as a lack of understanding from both sides can lead to unexpected consequences. In post-independent East Timor, the church was maligned by the government due to its religious association, leading it to become what McGregor, Skeaff & Bevan (2012) describe as a "fortress church" (p.1140). They argue that the states refusal to engage with the church not only contributed to its regressive backlash but denied the ability for it to be an alternative space in the geography of development.

Religious spaces and beliefs, are far from being fixed entities. The threat of climate change, has led many religious institutions to push a message of stewardship and environmental preservation. McNaught, Warrick & Cooper (2014) have argued that "information must resonate with local and indigenous ways of understanding the world if communities are to 'own' the adaptation process" (p.1491). The scientific discourse of global warming and climate change may not be culturally relevant and religious institutions can provide interpretations that are sensitive to both faith and local cultures. Haluza-Delay (2014) identifies three ways in which religion can promote response to climate change: through invoking moral obligation and shaping behaviours; by engaging with wider audience through established networks and by drawing on its material and social resources. Yet this does not address or challenge the factors that have caused climate change and place the burden of adaptation upon

populations who have done little to create the problem with which they are now facing.

3. OCEANIA AND THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The role that religion plays in Oceania² is complex. The institution of the church can be a positive space for development, fostering agency and contributing to personal empowerment. On the other hand, pressure to fulfil church obligations creates expectations upon members that cost both time and money. Writing on church's contribution to development in Samoa, Thornton, Kerslake & Binns (2010) attest "traditionally, kinship and Christianity form the foundation for all political, economic and social organisation and are inextricably linked" (p.1). The authors argue that the expectation of tithing in some churches creates an environment of "alienation and obligation", the pressure of which has led some members to leave the church. In doing so they risk isolation and exclusion from customary, communal land. Although the church is dedicated to the spiritual development of communities the authors found that in Samoa "the practice of seeking contributions from local members largely serves the organisational purpose of church expansionism" (p.9). Addressing material development needs is not seen as a priority of the church and money from the congregation is not necessarily redistributed to those who need it most.

Duty to the church takes different forms, and can directly affect women's time and resources. As Varani-Norton (2005) shows, many indigenous women in Fijian villages, are required to give time to church duties, such as preparing food for visiting officials, on top of their own household workload. She argues, that although women are offered spiritual development through their duties, they are hindered from

² I choose to use the term Oceania, as opposed to other common terms, such as the Pacific region or the Pacific Islands. This encompasses the ethno-geographical regions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, but excludes Australia and New Zealand (see Hau'ofa 1994; 1998).

achieving economic security because their obligations to the church and the *vanua* “takes so much of their resources in time, material wealth and energy” (p.225). Women suffer a triple burden of home, community and church obligations. Though these activities may themselves offer avenues to empowerment, they can also leave women with little time for themselves.

Seeing the church as inimical to women’s development, tells only part of the story. In fact, women’s church groups can be important spaces for meeting, sharing, organising and empowering women (Scheyvens, 2003). In the Solomon Islands, these groups allowed women a break from their domestic life and a place for their voice to be heard. A Western ideal of feminism and women’s rights may not see the value in church groups as spaces for providing empowerment. However, as Scheyvens (2003) shows, “it is clearly possible to work through seemingly conservative institutions to empower women and this may be desirable...to avoid stirring up widespread opposition to the programs in place” (p.40). She stresses the importance of hearing a plurality of voices in the path to women’s empowerment and that local groups are better attune to the local context than outsider NGOs.

Religion is not the only marker identity for people in the Pacific, yet it can provide a frame for deciphering different events. In the wake of a disaster, both scientific and spiritual interpretations are invoked. Some disregard the sacred and reduce the world to what is observable and measureable. From this position, natural disasters have a clear explanation, caused by physical processes. Others, seek explanations beyond the physical world. These “attributions do not just help...explain...why the disaster happened; they also give a feeling of control, allowing the development of appropriate reaction to the disaster, in order to counter it or at least limit its impact” (Grandjean, Rendu, MacNamee & Scherer, 2008, p.194). For the community in Votua, Fiji personal belief in God provided a source of comfort and relief during, what was, for many, a truly frightening and unfamiliar experience.

4. SPIRITUAL CONCEPTIONS OF DISASTER

4.1 Methodology

This research is drawn, in part, from insights gained while part of a research team studying post disaster recovery processes in Fiji. I spent a week in the village of Votua in July 2016, along with three other students and two lecturers from the University of Auckland, as well as three students from the University of the South Pacific (USP), in Suva. We obtained ethics approval from the University of Auckland to explore the impact that Cyclone Winston had had on the community. The village itself has been part of an ongoing research project exploring climate change adaptation in post-disaster recovery processes. We observed certain protocol appropriate to conducting research in an indigenous Fijian setting, such as presenting the *sevusevu* and gaining permission from the village elders. Meo-Sewabu (2014) discusses the role of the *sevusevu*. "The cultural protocol of the *sevusevu* not only honours the land but, if accepted by the village elders, it implies a blanket consent...to be in the village and for all villagers to participate...With this approval, individual consent [is] redundant" (p351). This meant there had to be a negotiation between respecting local cultural practices and adhering to Western-style University ethics that require consent at an individual level.

The main source of data for the overall research comes from journals that we gave to different members of the community. The total number of inhabitants is around 650, spread amongst three different clans. We divided the village into five sections and journals were given to members of ten different households within each section. We tried to cover a range of ages, as well as a balance between men and women. The respondents ranged in age from seventeen up to seventy years old. The majority of women who responded listed their main occupation as domestic duties and most of the men were fishermen or farmers. The journals provided a set of guiding questions, in Fijian, that asked about their experiences of Cyclone Winston, what help they had received and the impact it had had on themselves and the wider community. Upon

receiving the journal, the respondents were informed that the data collected would contribute to our future research. The majority responded in Fijian and the journals were translated by three, paid research assistants from USP.

Journal writing can be a personal, reflective endeavor that removes the unnatural setting of the formal research interview. At the same time, it is still a site of production, where “the creation of knowledge is done in a place and time” (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p.141). Respondents had to time to craft their answers, which were then interpreted and translated by our research assistants. Finally, for the purposes of this thesis, I examined the journals to identify themes relevant to this dissertation. The knowledge passed through many layers of interpretation, which modifies and constrains the limits of any research. We relied completely on our Fijian research assistants for translation. This can, and likely did, lead to certain information being lost, modified or omitted all together. Research assistants “come to the field with their own preconceptions, values and belief systems” (Turner, 2010, p.210) and led to a co-construction of knowledge filtered through the respondent, the research assistant and myself.

A large part of this research comes from pre-existing literature due to the limited amount of data I was able to collect in my brief visit to Fiji. The primary data collected cannot offer a complete picture, rather, I accept it “is only a window and like any scene from a window, it tells only a partial story” (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p.3). It also completely omits the perspective of the Indo-Fijian community, who are a large percentage of the population. Despite these limitations, the translated journals provided some understanding of how participants understood and rationalised the causes of Cyclone Winston, the impacts it had upon the community and, importantly, gave a sense of how they might plan for the future. These are the insights that I draw on to address my research questions.

4.2 Researcher Positionality

Writing and researching about the so-called 'Third World' from the perspective of the West inevitably creates distance between the writer and the subject. This process of 'othering' (Said, 1995) turns the gaze outward, and away from the researcher's own position. Writers, such as Spivak, call for "hyper self-reflexivity" (Kapoor, 2004), by critically addressing our inherently held beliefs. People are a product of their environments, shaped by social, cultural and political discourses. As a researcher, I am not a pure *tabula rasa*, but instead come with pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, and subjectivities that have never been deeply interrogated or challenged. My positionality is informed by "socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographical, historical, institutional" (*ibid*, p. 628) constructions that have informed and shaped my views and research. It is impossible to completely untether from my own discursive environment but by acknowledging it, I can attempt to challenge and question my own inherent biases.

In outlining a framework to guide indigenous researchers, Nabobo-Baba (2008) argues for "decolonising research...using culturally appropriate framings that recognise Pacific...worldviews" (p.143). Within development scholarship, Western knowledge and practice has been privileged and indigenous epistemology overlooked (Mohanty, 2003). It is not my intent to speak for or misrepresent the Indigenous Fijian experience nor deny the importance of Fijian epistemology. My interpretations will inevitably be filtered by my own perceptions as a white, non-Pacific researcher. It is impossible to completely decolonise my research, however my intention in this thesis is to draw modestly on the journals, written by village inhabitants with reference to Fijian academics. At the same I acknowledge that I approach this research as an outsider and am part of a long history of Western writers writing about and constructing knowledge of other cultures (Said, 1995).

4.3 'My God, My Land': Religious Discourse in Fiji

Before moving into a discussion of religious beliefs post-Cyclone Winston, a brief history of Christianity in Fiji can provide a wider context for understanding life in Votua. In Fiji, those who identify as Christian are spread among what Varani-Norton (2005) describes as the historic mainline churches, including the Methodist and Catholic churches, and the more evangelical, new religious groups. However, the largest percentage belong to the Methodist Church, and it is Methodism that has played a decisive (and at times divisive) role in Fijian politics, development and social life. Christianity was first introduced to Fiji by Methodist missionaries in 1835. It was adopted by the local population while being modified and shaped by pre-existing customs and traditions.

Presterudstuen (2016) shows how "this culturally specific way of defining tradition made indigenous Fijians able to claim ownership over newly adopted practices" (p.111). Christianity was, in a sense, decolonised. By integrating with local chiefly structures, as well as spiritual beliefs, Methodism and the *vanua* became "inseparable entities" (*ibid*, p.113) serving, in part, to naturalise an indigenous Fijian Christianity.

I am not able to give sufficient attention to the intersection of religion, culture and politics in Fiji, but it is important to recognise that narratives of connection between people, the land and God, have often been evoked so as to exclude the large population of Indo-Fijians from rights of land ownership. Ryle (2010) shows how the term 'my God, my land', originally embodying the connection between land and faith, was co-opted. The "once spiritually evocative saying has for many people become equated with racist politics and violence...by its use in divisive, nationalist, ethno-religious rhetoric and attacks on Indo-Fijians" (p.xxxi).

The Methodist Church, in particular, pushed to transform Fiji from a secular to a religious state (Weir, 2015). This "claim of a 'Christian state'...has been widely seen as symbolic, a coded demand for paramountcy and *iTaukei* ethnic exclusiveness" (*ibid*, p.167). After Bainimarama came to power it was unclear what political role, if any, the

Methodist Church would play in, as they were excluded from discussion concerning Fiji's future development. This was because Bainimarama saw the Methodist Church as supporting his enemies and many within the church's leadership did not believe Bainimarama had the legitimacy to rule the country (*ibid*).

Religion continues to play an important role for many indigenous and Indo-Fijians. As Tuwere (2002) argues, the three elements of *lotu* (religion), *vanua* (land/people) and *matanitu* (kingdom/government) form the stool upon which indigenous Fijian culture and society sits. The word *vanua* in Fijian indigenous language means land, but it also means people. Tuwere (2002) describes the various symbolic meanings that land holds for Fijians. It gives them life and their livelihood, it is a marker of the passing of time and signaling of events, and it provides a sense of identity. He writes, "what is conceptualized in the *vanua* is life that acquires meaning when lived in community with others-not only with other human beings but also with ancestors...plants and animals, land and sea and everything on it" (p.69). Land and community are tightly bound to place for Tuwere, one cannot exist meaningfully without the other. This relationship has often been invoked as a justification for ethnic nationalism. Yet Tuwere acknowledges that the land "belongs to all human beings...[it] cannot be the sole prerogative of Christians or one particular racial group" (p.133). Land is important, and should be respected.

4.4 The Space of Disaster

Votua village is an indigenous Fijian community in the Ba watershed in the North of Fiji's main island Viti Levu. It is made up of three different clans, each with their respective chiefs. The majority of inhabitants depend on the land and sea for their livelihood. They farm cassava and taro and collect shellfish and fish in the Ba river which is sold at the markets.

Cyclone Winston struck Fiji on the 20th of February. It was one of the strongest cyclones ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere and its

impact was devastating. Forty-four people lost their lives, “entire communities were destroyed and...destruction of crops has compromised almost 60% of Fiji’s population (Ministry of Economy, 2016). In Votua, many houses were partially or completely destroyed. When we visited in July the damage to the village was still apparent. Many families were still living in the makeshift blue tents supplied by the secular Red Cross and they had been without electricity up till a week prior to our arrival. The Methodist and Catholic churches are at the centre of the village and play an important part in village life. They are also evacuation sites and during Cyclone Winston many people sought refuge within them. But the safety provided by the church was not merely structural. Religious beliefs were also a source of comfort during a time of fear and confusion.

Responses to natural disasters need to be aware of the local context and engage with targeted communities, respecting their beliefs and embedded knowledge. Lack of understanding can assume disaster spaces are generic. McGregor (2010) argues that secular humanitarian responses construct interventions that can be universally applied, without sensitivity to local needs and practices (including the religious). He claims that “aid chains typically expose powerful, top-down, multiscale, cross-border flows of resources and knowledge from donor to recipient countries” (p.730) and that local religious institutions may be better positioned to respond to certain needs. Secular, humanitarian ideology adheres to principles of human rights and neutrality but such a response may overlook the importance of sacred spaces or spiritual support.

According to the report issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2016) the humanitarian assistance for Cyclone Winston “actively advocated for...a stronger degree of localised response” (p.2). The funds raised were spread amongst eight different ‘clusters’ and each of these groups was co-led by an international agency or NGO, such as Unicef, the World Food Programme, the Red Cross, or the FAO, in conjunction with a Fijian government ministry (UNOCHA, 2016).

It is not clear from the report what role religious institutions have played in the recovery process but including them in any future disaster response efforts has clear benefits. The report highlighted that the logistics of delivering assistance was difficult for the rather small humanitarian community, particularly in reaching remote areas and islands. Votua village itself was cut off from Ba town, due to flooding, and supplies had to be brought in by boat. Religious spaces not only serve as important spaces for community interaction and engagement, but become evacuation centres during emergencies and can be an important site of first response (Rivera & Nickels, 2014). They may also provide trauma counselling that is more sensitive to people's religious beliefs. Wariness around utilising religious spaces for humanitarian purposes may be attributed to the concern that only the 'faithful' will be helped (Cain & Barthemly, 2008). However, FBOs operating in the post Winston environment, such as ADRA, though religiously affiliated, provided relief to whoever needed it, regardless of their own personal beliefs.

In Votua, the community received assistance from many avenues, both formal and informal, secular and religious. The government was the biggest source of aid, however the journals also recorded help coming from family members in Fiji and abroad, neighbouring communities, local companies, and various international NGOs and government institutions, such as the Red Cross, Unicef and AusAID. Religious institutions, both local and international were also a significant source of support. Assistance came not only from Christian denominations but from Muslim, Hindu and Hare Krishna groups. This showed that humanitarian assistance did not follow a single path and community members were able to draw on different relationships and receive support from a range of different sources. Assistance occurred at many different levels, from the local through to the international. This shows the importance of fostering relationships between different actors involved, both official and unofficial, to ensure a coordinated and timely response.

4.5 Faith-Based Interpretations

In discussing the journal responses of the villagers, I draw on the work of two indigenous Fijian scholars, to explore what role religion plays in the wake of a natural disaster and how religious beliefs influence the interpretation of traumatic events. I also question if faith in God provides a form of inner strength and what the potential may be for utilising religious beliefs in disaster recovery and response.

Naboba-Baba (2006) describes the significance of religion to indigenous Fijians as thus: "*Lotu* (spirituality/worship) is important knowledge and central to contemporary life...It is generally seen as the tenet which should underpin the *vanua*" (p.87). Faith is seen as a guiding principle in the community and the presence of God must be acknowledged. For some, Winston was proof of God's existence and omnipotence.

"Most of all we should acknowledge our God who gives us the breath of life [through] which we are able to live and who takes control of everything in this universe" (R46, F 39).³

"Seeing the trees sweeping the skies, a deep thought came to my mind that it is true that God can do anything at any time" (R29, M 30).

The cyclone was less a demonstration of the destructive force of nature and more as a manifestation of God's power.

At the same time respondents showed awareness of other forces responsible for the cyclone, such as global warming and changing weather patterns. For Nabobo-Baba (2006) land is "of physical, social and spiritual significance to people" (p.81). She describes how "nature is regarded anthropomorphically, and one often hears...nature provides a source of truth" (p. 62). When writing about the days leading up to Cyclone Winston, villagers spoke of signs from nature that gave evidence of what was to come. R30 (M 62) wrote:

"The weather pattern we experienced every day, before the cyclone was quite surprising...I experienced hot weather in the day time and also in the night time

³ In order to respect confidentiality I refer to the respondents by the letter R (respondent) and a number. This is followed by their stated gender and age

with little rainfall before Winston...There was also little catch from our fishing ground, plants or root crops from our plantation were also experiencing drought" The villagers were able to observe small changes in the climate and local environment and interpreted them as signs of what was to come:

"I even saw signs appear within my surroundings such as trees which were dying and fallen fruits, indicators that were used by our ancestors" (R25, M 25).

For Nabobo-Baba (2006) a "long existence and relationship with a particular ecology" (p.83) draws on historical knowledge from sustained use of the land.

Tuwere (2002) speaks of "nature...as a teacher" (p. 152) and that respect for the knowledge of the land be upheld. A common thread running through a majority of journals interpreted Cyclone Winston as a lesson to be learned from. For some this meant taking heed of media warnings and always being prepared:

"It taught me to be more vigilant and to listen and act upon the announcements that we hear over the radio" (R2, M 34).

"We should always be prepared, it...really taught us a lesson and that is that we should always be prepared at all times" (R4, M 66).

For others the lesson provided by Winston was more spiritual in nature.

"Myself I know for sure that God is teaching us a lesson. Most of the things that happen in life we do take it for granted. Winston has taught me to draw nearer to God at all time" (R47, F 44).

"We should change our lifestyle since God's love is still there for us. We should do what is right and live the life that God commanded us to" R7, F 20).

The lesson of Cyclone Winston was interpreted in different ways but almost all the respondents acknowledged that there had to be a change moving forward, whether this was being more prepared for future natural disasters or cultivating a stronger relationship with their religion and God.

Tuwere (2002) describes the way in which traditional and religious beliefs have merged to provide knowledge about the right kind of life to lead: "The way of the *vanua* is to *davo donu* (...to lie straight)-that is...all live justly and peacefully with one another, with the ancestors and with God and with nature...The opposite as "*davo cala* (to lie in a crooked way)" (p.130). This belief can lead to natural disasters being seen as "a

crooked relationship between man and other beings" (p.130). The Cyclone appeared to some as a form of punishment or warning for not leading a 'holy' life.

"So many of us are sinners, which is ungodly. Therefore God sent such disasters like cyclones to happen in order for people to repent" (R7, F 20)

"...if we are not real with God, Fiji will continuously face these unexpected events" (R43, F 41).

For others Cyclone Winston reflected the power of God, and his control over the earth and all its elements.

"Only Jehovah the strong, the Almighty, the most high is in charge of everything...The cyclone that we experienced describes that God is the creator of all things" (R17, F 45)

"All powerful things on this earth are limited and we should know that God is more powerful. T.C Winston proves that there is a living God." (R 39, M 43).

Attributing natural disasters to the overwhelming power of God can both inspire a sense of fatalism and powerlessness and provide motivation for change and action (Joakim & White, 2015).

Cyclone Winston was the strongest storm in living memory for many of the respondents and the destruction it brought came as a total shock.

"Cyclone Winston was the worst experience I've ever had. It was very frightening" (R15, M 28).

"It was a very traumatising experience for us and I was very terrified" (R18, M 48).

The unfamiliar experience inspired feelings of fear, confusion and anxiety. Certain villagers recounted how a knowledge of God's presence created a space of inner peace and comfort amongst the chaos of the storm.

"I was scared but I tried to be strong. Many thoughts can to my mind but deep inside my heart there was peace, I know my God will surely protect my family" (R29, M 30)

Respondents were able to take a traumatic experience and reinterpret it as a test of faith, with an understanding that their relationship with God would help them to weather any hardship.

4.6 Adapting to Disaster

Different writers argue, that spiritual beliefs are themselves a form of resilient behavior, aiding individuals in difficult situations. Manning (2014) describes spiritual resilience as “an outcome of successful adaption to adversity...[and] the process of recovery...sustainability and growth” (p.354). Joakim & White (2015) describe the three aspects of resilience as resistance (the ability to withstand shock), recovery (the speed at which an individual or community ‘bounces back’) and creativity (the ability to learn and adapt from the experience).

R30 spoke of how his belief in God gave him strength to resist the fear of the storm:

“It was challenging to see all these things but one thing that came to mind was that I am serving a living God who was able to bring me through it” (M 62).

R29’s faith gave him the strength to recover and move forward, despite the difficult circumstances:

“I continued to thank the Lord for the special love to my beautiful family...Winston came and now gone and people are left homeless just like my family, that is so sad, but that is not the end to life, because our life begins a new chapter each morning. We all have to move on” (M 30).

For R46, God’s omnipotence coexisted with the conviction that the community itself must adapt and grow.

“It’s time to take ownership and attend workshops where we are properly advised on what to do during whatever disasters. Most of all we should always acknowledge our God who gives us the breath of life...and who takes control of everything in this universe” (F 39).

This respondent’s faith in God’s control doesn’t disempower her of the ability to create a better future for herself. All of these examples demonstrate ways that spiritual beliefs provide a form of resilience, with “strength and buoyancy...rooted in their spirituality and...their relationship with God” (Manning, 2014, p.357).

The journal responses demonstrated an awareness that the future was likely to bring more storms of Winston’s magnitude and in ever increasing frequency.

“People have to be on the lookout and prepare very well for the future hurricane season. Cyclone Winston was category 5, maybe the next one will be category 6” (R28, M 71).

“We should be prepared at all times since we are experiencing climate change. It is time to think of all the natural disasters that will strike our island like flooding, tsunamis, earthquakes, cyclones, soil erosion and many others” (R46, F 39).

For some, climate change was attributed to God, displaying how different forms of knowledge merge to make sense of certain events.

“I think climate change was the main cause for this disaster to take place...to me this reflects the will of God” (R13, F 53).

Stewardship over the earth is an important part of Christian theology and is being increasingly invoked as a way to face the threat of climate change (Haluza-Delay, 2014).

What these responses show is that there are many ways of interpreting traumatic events, both religious and scientific. Beliefs are more syncretic than separate and show the need for incorporating religious, scientific and indigenous frames when responding and adapting to disasters.

5. A TALANOA FOR DEVELOPMENT

Talanoa at its simplest means “talking about nothing in particular, and interacting without a rigid framework” (Vaiolleti, 2006, p.23). It is a conversation, which requires both respect and reciprocity between those involved. Havea (2010) likens the discourse of climate change to a *talanoa*, albeit one that has been dominated by certain voices, at the expense of others, particularly the people of Oceania. He argues that the scientific interpretation of climate change frames the ocean as an ever encroaching, dangerous presence. However, for the people of Oceania “divinity is present in land and ocean” and it should be seen as both a connection to the past as well as a future source of life and livelihood, rather than something to be feared.

Climate change is generally explained scientifically, attributed to both natural and man-made processes. Religious beliefs on the other

hand are relegated to the realm of faith, unable to be empirically proven. Yet awareness of climate change and religious beliefs are not mutually exclusive. Haluza-Delay (2014) believes that "faith is not incommensurable with the sciences of climate change" (p.261) and that religious beliefs can promote a discourse of environmental protection and sustainability. In 2009, the Pacific Conference of Churches published a petition, stressing the importance of stewardship over the land and calling for global cooperation in addressing climate change (PCC, 2009). It is likely that the future will continue to bring severe weather and rising oceans. Communities around the world will be faced with the problem of how to adapt to these conditions. As Havea (2010) argues "climate change is a global reality, but we should not seek to globalize how we understand and respond to it" (p.353). The conversation around climate change and adaptation needs to be inclusive of a multitude of voices, and not silence the ones who are impacted the most.

Development institutions continually seek new partnerships, new actors and new avenues for development. Engagement with religious organisations may provide opportunities for development alternatives that are more sensitive and attune to the "nuance of the local" (Unterhalter, Heslop & Mamedu, 2013, p.567). At the same time these partnerships must not be used as a conduit for spreading Western development approaches to the rest of the world. Change is difficult and it means challenging dominant discourses and assumptions. As Nabobo-Baba attests: "It is important to hear the silenced voices of once-colonised peoples so that we may discover new perspectives on knowledge" (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p.125).

The people of Oceania do not speak with one voice, but many, and there must be an opportunity for these voices to be heard. The narratives found within the journals are a small step towards giving voice to those arguably most vulnerable to extreme weather and climate change. People within Votua understand that it is important to act and adapt to an uncertain future.

"We should protect our environment and not prey on it that we may sow beauty not pollution and destruction. We must individually and collectively respond to the challenge to work together for the common good to ensure that the land and the sea are not polluted and to speak with one voice to the suffering that our environment and our communities are facing" (R49, F 38).

"We should make a stand and move towards ensuring that we keep our environment clean and not overuse the natural resources given to us. Our future depends on what we do now and how we educate ourselves, we must think of and respect our environment if we want a happy ending" (R31, M 25).

Responses to natural disasters and climate change must be collaborative, and reflect a diversity of viewpoints that includes "a place for Pacific Islanders' own knowledges and epistemologies" (Hviding, 2003, p.64), which are themselves many and various.

CONCLUSION

In the opening chapter to *Religion, Politics and Development*, Fountain et al., (2015) argue that hope "becomes the foundation upon which visions for alternative futures are constructed, disseminated, advocated, and enacted" (p.26). However idealistic this may seem, it is important not to lose hope while remembering that it does not follow a proscribed path with a singular destination. There are multiple ways to move forward that are inclusive of a diverse range of voices. It is important not to subscribe to a two-dimensional version (and vision) of development, made of separate and distinct categories of actors and organisations. The reality is more complex, consisting of multiple spheres of knowledge, identities and relationships that interact and evolve over time.

This does not mean that the work of faith-based institutions should not be critically examined, or that harmful religious beliefs be ignored in the name of cultural relativism. At the same time the ideological baggage that accompanies secularity must also be interrogated (Wee, 2006) and seen for what it is, just one of many ways to conceive of the world. This syncretic thinking moves toward a "union or reconciliation of diverse, even opposed, beliefs, tenets, procedures and practices" (Eipper, 2011,

p.34). It appears that the presence of religion and religious institutions in the public sphere will persist. Therefore, the nexus of religion and development remains an important area for critical scholarly enquiry.

The opening of the development space to other actors, such as the religious, should be welcomed as it is an opportunity for other voices and subjectivities to be added to the conversation. The role that religion plays in the world is multi-faceted and complex. It can be both an inhibiting force and an agent for change. Within Fiji, the role of religion is equally complicated, tied to discourses of ethno-nationalism and neo-traditionalism (Lawson, 1997). Fiji's history shows the complications that can arise in pluralistic societies where different religions and ethnicities co-exist together. The Methodist Church has played a dominant role in Fiji's politics as well as influencing its development (Thornton, et al., 2012). Perhaps wanting to move away from a divisive past and create a more sustainable future, it has included both 'Christian stewardship' and interfaith relations, amongst the 12 pillars of the Methodist church (12 Pillars of the Church, n.d). At a more personal level, religion can also be a vital source of comfort and resilience during times of trauma and upheaval. Faith in God's power, was not only a way of interpreting an unfamiliar and frightening experience, but also provided a lesson to be better prepared for what the future may bring.

This research seeks to add, in a small way, to a global *talanoa* around issues of climate change, disaster response and recovery and encourage reciprocal relationships between religious and secular development institutions, particular in the area of humanitarian assistance. The narratives of the villagers in Votua cannot speak for the entire Fijian experience, but their voices can contribute to a greater understanding of the multitude ways people respond to and interpret natural disasters and how Pacific epistemologies can be included in the *talanoa* of development.

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