

Trouble Waters, Stormy Futures Symposium, University of Exeter (Penryn) 25/5/2016

Professor Kate Rigby
Bath Spa University and Monash University

Kiribati case study: The role of religion

Introduction:

Having initially set out to identify role of religion as part of the cultural context shaping understandings of climate change and responses to its impacts, current and anticipated, I ended up realising that religion could also be considered as part of heritage at risk, but also as a source of potential resilience and transformation.

My activities:

Following briefings with other researchers in Fiji, I travelled to Tarawa for an all-too-short week, timing my visit for Christian Holy Week (2-9 April) in order to participate in some of the Easter services. In addition to participant observation of three services (Good Friday in a large Catholic Church, part of Easter Sunday in Protestant church, and the normal Saturday service with the Seventh Day Adventist congregation [who do not celebrate Easter]), I conducted 7 formal interviews and held extensive informal discussions with my host, Pelenise Alofa, a leading CC activist in Kiribati, and a Seventh Day Adventist. I was also taken to visit a community that had been badly affected by flooding as a result of recent king tides, as well as a community that is experimenting with communal organic food production as part of a sustainable development project.

Due to the brevity of this visit to only the main island (which is not necessarily representative of Kiribati as a whole), and relatively small interview sample, this can only be considered a pilot study, and all findings are provisional.

My Interviewees:

These were selected to provide perspectives from all major denominations from individuals with known CC concern :

1. Prof. Teweiariki Teaero, educationalist, poet, artist, climate change advocate, Roman Catholic
2. Metaka Raeri, leader of Assemblies of God youth group, nominated to go to Australia with Pacific Calling for training in CC advocacy
3. Uriam Kauongo, chief elder of his island, Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC)
4. A Kiribati Uniting Church Minister, coordinator of KUC's CC group (anonymous).
5. Lotua Tune, former President of Kiribati Church of Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon) and Principal of main Mormon secondary school in Tarawa,
6. A lay Catholic working closely with Kiribati Climate Action Network (KiriCAN) (anonymous)

7. Nakibae Teuatabo, retired, but still working occasionally for Ministry of Environment, Bahai
8. (Planned interview with senior figure in Ministry of Env. And former KUC minister cancelled due to ill health)

Provisional findings:

1. Religion as cultural frame

Religion is all-pervasive in Kiribati, an important part of collective identity and everyday life, with only c. 5% reporting no religious faith, and the overwhelming majority Christian (c. 55% Catholic, 37% Protestant, 3% Mormon, 2% 7th Day Adventist), 2% Bahai), but with indigenous beliefs and values surviving, especially among those living more traditionally on the outer islands; but also in some cases under the umbrella of Christianity, notably in the Catholic church (e.g. on Easter Saturday, the largest Catholic church in Tarawa hosts a dance competition with participants from across the country [primarily north of Tarawa], performing dances which have their origins in Indigenous traditions; the Protestants, most of whom live in the southern islands, by contrast, have a decidedly more sedate, but also partially traditional, choral competition).

I had my first glimpse of the importance of religion in the South Pacific before my departure when I attended a presentation by the anti-coal protest group, [Pacific Warriors](#), one of whom declared “We’re all hard-core Christians”, and went on to explain their reading of a core biblical text, the flood narrative from Gen. 6-9, according to which God’s promise never to again bring a deluge to inundate the whole earth indicated that today’s rising sea levels were caused by humans, and humans therefore had the responsibility of arresting further sea level rise by combatting global warming.

En route to Kiribati, however, I was alerted to an alternative reading of the “Rainbow Covenant”, namely namely as a guarantee that God would not allow the islands in the Sth Pacific (and elsewhere) to be flooded. One of my interviewees expressed dismay and frustration with respect to the complacency towards CC that this theocentric interpretation was causing, or reinforcing, even among some clergy.

Nonetheless, according to Pelenise, all the main Christian denominations in Kiribati had representatives in KiriCAN, and she anticipated the Bahais would also be sending a representative soon. Interestingly, this included the American evangelical Assemblies of God, which leans towards CC denialism in the US. In fact, my first interviewee was with a young KiriCAN rep from AoG, who was being briefed about his visit to Australia as one of two young people from Kiribati who had been chosen to receive CC advocacy training through the Australian Catholic Pacific Calling organisation.

From what I was able to glean in my short stay, this involvement did not necessarily imply any kind of ecotheological orientation, however, being more likely to be framed in terms of CC-related impacts on human habitation, livelihood, and well-being, sometimes explicitly linked to Christian ethic of social justice. Prof. Teaero, however, did articulate a strongly creation-centred spirituality, informed both by Catholicism

and indigenous traditions. In his account, the latter foreground human kinship with other creatures, as well as positioning humans and other creatures as co-creators with the supreme deity in their creation narrative. My elderly Bahai interviewee, who had been raised Protestant, but with exposure to some indigenous traditions as well, also shared stories of human-animal connectivity, and pointed out that such links were manifest in traditional naming practices, notably after birds. The KUC minister whom I interviewed anonymously warmed to the possibility of extending Christian ethics of justice and compassion to non-human others, while Lotua Tune of the Church of the Latter Day Saints explained that one of their prophets had experienced a vision of God weeping on account of the human despoliation of the Earth. This had contributed to a strong strand of creation care in Mormon teaching, in his account.

Several of my interviewees were keen to emphasise the ways in which people in Kiribati could take action to address other environmental problems over which they had greater agency, such as dealing with the serious litter problem that has arisen from the influx of packaged food and drink and other manufactured items, in the absence of appropriate waste disposal mechanisms. This litter had been swept into the homes of those affected by the recent floods, compounding their deleterious effects. Here, it was apparent that religious values relating to neighbour-love and collective action for the common good were playing a part. Similarly, at the time of these interviews, the Church of Latter Day saints was organising a water treatment system for outer islands affected by Cyclone Pam.

2. Religion as at-risk heritage

Most obviously, this includes the built heritage of church buildings and other infrastructure. Perhaps more grievously, however, it pertains to the less tangible heritage of traditional beliefs and practices that are strongly place-based (notably reverence for ancestors and mythic heroes in specific places [one of which is sited in the grounds of the Mormon secondary school in Tarawa]). One of the things that is of particular concern in this connection is the fate of the dead, if and when the population has to relocate: will they have to dig up the bones of their ancestors and take them away from their ancestral lands, or leave them to be swallowed by rising waters?

3. Religion as source of resilience and transformation

Christian ethics of social justice (particularly among Catholics and mainstream Protestants) provides a strong foundation for I-Kiribati advocating CC mitigation and assistance for adaptation. In this connection, it was very encouraging for some of my interviewees to learn of the move to disinvest from the fossil fuel industry among some of the churches (notably Uniting and Anglican) in Australia and New Zealand (as well as elsewhere). This was seen as an act of solidarity with those in the front-line of climate change impacts, most of whom had done least to cause the problem of anthropogenic global warming, and prompted two of my interviewees to frame messages for me to take back to Anglican church of which I was then a synod member (Diocese of Melbourne), and which had recently voted in favour of a motion on divestment (which I had myself proposed). While the Catholic church in Australia had not yet committed to divestment, the previously mentioned Australian-based [Pacific Calling Partnership](#) is dedicated to responding to calls from our low-lying

island neighbours in the Torres Strait and the Pacific about the serious threat that climate change poses to them; recognising that Australia has an ecological debt to these peoples; and raising awareness of our responsibility to these communities as part of a global solution towards a sustainable future.

Also, because Christianity is not a place-based faith, with God understood to be ever-present wherever you are, it could potentially provide a source of comfort and reassurance for those facing relocation or emigration. It is to be hoped that religious organisations in receiving countries would also provide tangible support for the displaced (consistent with the stance of the mainstream churches, e.g., on asylum seekers). In addition, the Mormon practice of sending school leavers abroad to other Mormon communities now has the added value of giving participating youth international experience that could help them to migrate with dignity, in accordance with one of the policy initiatives of President Anote Tong.

One line of investigation that I would like to pursue further in the future is whether it might be possible to strengthen creation-centred theologies/spiritualities, potentially combining Christian ecotheology with aspects of indigenous spirituality and values, in advancing ecological and multi-species approaches to CC-resilient sustainable development, to the extent that remaining on at least some of the islands remains a viable option, but also as something that might be translated into new living situation, especially if mass migration to the same place (e.g. Fiji) is feasible. In this connection, it would be very interesting to know whether, and in what ways, Pope Francis' powerful message of solidarity with fellow creatures, human and otherwise, and call to respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, might have made a difference in Kiribati since I was there.