

RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHRIST, CALENDAR AND LECTIONARY

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Abstract

Ecumenical proposals are currently apace about a new feast for the churches' calendars—a 'Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos'. This article notes with appreciation one important aspect of the feast—its detachment of christological liturgical celebration from northern hemisphere solstices (as Christmas) and equinoxes (as Easter). But it also raises concerns about failures of elite ecumenism to listen to the whole church about the whole mystery of Christ, and especially the feast proposal missing the opportunity to learn about grace from the earth in Oceanic perspective.

Keywords

calendar, creation, ecumenism, land, lectionary

Introduction

This article seeks to open up discussion of topics about which persons other than the author are most qualified to speak, and on issues that link to many other concerns both wider and deeper than those in focus here. Such as it is, the article is offered in hope that it will encourage people of Pasifika to speak up. My invitation is to reflect on contemporary ecumenical proposals about a new christological feast for many churches' calendars, a so-called 'Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos'. I consider this proposal from Oceanic perspectives, identifying some merit in the proposal as well as locating various problems with it.

The Feast

Conferences and Canticles

In 2024, a cohort of elite ecumenical bodies came together to propose a new feast for churches of western tradition: a Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, which, these bodies proposed, would ‘ideally’ be celebrated each year from September 2025. (I use the word ‘elite’ quite intentionally here, employing Robert Gribben’s less-than-affirmative term for ecumenical conversation that goes on at the top tier of hierarchies. ‘Elite’ might be contrasted with ‘grassroots’, local, approaches. See Gribben 2004.) The timing of the feast’s proposed inauguration is deliberate, as 2025 is the 1700th anniversary of the ecumenical council of Nicaea, whose creed remains normative for doctrine in many churches and is commonly recited in eucharistic celebration. The second stanza of the Nicene Creed declares of Jesus Christ that ‘through him all things were made’—and so the new feast intends to give particular emphasis to that creedal declaration.

The elite group proposing this new feast was coordinated by a Roman Catholic circle of scholars much indebted to Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on the environment, and threats to it, *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis 2015; see also Grayland 2024). That Christians of different communions might also be grateful for Francis’s words on the environment can be seen in that the World Council of Churches, as well as groups from churches encircled by WCC membership such as the Anglican Communion and World Communion of Reformed Churches—those elite bodies—have joined with the Vatican in calling for exploration of the new feast. To that end, in March 2024, representatives of these and other like-kind bodies gathered (with other invitees online) for a conference at Assisi, Italy (13–14 March 2024), famous as a major site in the ministry of Saint Francis.

The site of the conference, like the proposed starting date for the feast (2025), was also deliberate, as 2025 is also the 800th anniversary of Francis’s ‘Canticle of the Creatures’, Francis’s beloved song in which sun and moon, stars and fire and Mother Earth are the subject of his praise. In Francis’s canticle, ‘Brother Sun’, ‘lovely, shining with great splendour’, heralds the Most High, while ‘Sister Moon and Stars’, ‘lightsome and precious and fair’, give their praise along with ‘Brother Wind’, ‘Sister Water’, ‘Brother Fire’ and ‘Mother Earth, ‘who sustains us and directs us’ (Dupré and Wiseman 2001, 119–20). At the 2024 Assisi conference, persons such as Janet Martin Soskice (Canadian, Roman Catholic, based between Britain and the US) and Rowan Williams (British, Anglican) spoke, as did members of Orthodox churches of the east whose own practice of observing something like ‘Creation day’ in September is credited (in the documents of the conference) as one of the sources for the suggestion that the new feast for the western churches might also take place in September.

Ecumenical and Other Concerns

In an era of so-called ‘ecumenical winter’ (see Burns 2023), a development such as a new shared feast is no small achievement. It should be remembered that it comes a little more than a decade after significant withdrawals from ecumenical convergence, given that numerous western churches, which had, for a time, shared texts in common have done so less since the 2010 translation of the order of mass in the Roman Catholic tradition. Through the past decade or so, the main symbolic weight of remaining commitment to ecumenical practice has been placed on shared lectionary use. For the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used (sometimes in a close variant) across many Protestant churches is itself an amendment of the Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass which emerged in the early 1970s from the call of the liturgy document of Vatican II for ‘richer fare to be provided at the table of God’s word’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], ¶51 [Vatican II Council 1963]; on three-year lectionaries, see Ramshaw 2019). In this context, therefore, the new feast proposal adds another strand of ongoing ecumenical commitment, after the demise of common texts—at least those shared between Protestants and Catholics. It bolsters liturgical expressions of the search for or celebration of a certain unity by adding to shared lectionary a common feast.

Indeed, when the feast proposal itself identifies several boons of the new feast, it puts ecumenical concerns above all. Hence it suggests that the new feast could ‘1) strengthen even further the path of Christian unity’, not least ‘as a fraternal gesture from the Western Churches recognizing the historical leadership of the Eastern Churches in regards to creation’. To that advantage, the proposal adds that the feast could also ‘2) enrich the liturgical calendars of Western Churches... which currently have no dedicated feast to celebrate the theological mystery of Creation’ as “‘all things were created through Him”, is absent’ from official celebration of the Christian year. The feast, the proposal adds, could further ‘3) nourish the spiritual life of the faithful, possibly correcting how Western churches have given so little attention to creation in recent centuries. (Also, it adds: ‘as a side effect, this would be particularly attractive to young people, supporting a key evangelization priority of all churches’.) Finally, it could ‘4) respond prophetically to the “signs of the times”, ‘deepen[ing] our collective commitment to the fate of God’s beloved Creation, while also uplifting Christianity’s relevance in addressing the challenges of this “Anthropocene Era”’ (Laudato Si’ Research Institute 2024). The point that such challenges are profoundly felt in Oceania hardly needs to be argued, given that islands are going under water.

Global South, Old North and West

The ecumenical feast proposal might indeed assist with each of these four aims. However, while different churches of both East and West are now converging in the exploration of a new Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, what I find so striking about both the proposals under exploration, and the voices which have so far been raised in the exploration, is the prevailing leaning to the north. While persons from the southern hemisphere were present as attendees at the Assisi conference, they rarely led the reflection, if at all.¹ To put the point gently, it would seem the ‘global south’ is still being led by the old north and west. But to this dynamic, other concerning observations can be added. For the new feast seems to be a missed opportunity to occasion deeper awareness in the north that all southern experience of liturgical seasons is out-of-synch with northern climatic patterns, with which liturgical seasons coalesce. As yet, there does not seem to have been much interest in this. More troubling again is that Oceanic perspectives about land that could enrich or even correct aspects of the feast proposal do not seem to have been sought. Moreover, real-time crises of climate change are overwhelmed in the feast proposal by concerns of western theologies. In my view, these matters deserve closer attention.

Ways of Seeing

It is hardly surprising that the Vatican would be a major player in a proposal emerging in connection to a papal encyclical or in seeking convergence between elite ecumenical bodies. Quite arguably, the Vatican is the appropriate body to represent Roman Catholics in such elite discussions. But once it is noted that Vatican City is the smallest country on earth in terms of land-mass, it perhaps seems somewhat curious that the very smallness of Vatican City does not seem to have favoured attention to other small countries. And notably, *had* attention to other small countries—and voices from them—been in focus, then of course people of Pasifika would have been included in discussion of the proposed new feast. Nauru, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Tonga and Kiribati appear after Vatican City near the top of lists of small countries measured by land-mass. By population, Niue, Palau, Tokelau would also be in sight with the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu again. Of course, emphasising land-mass is a way of thinking about ‘our sea of islands’ which is flipped in much Pasifika thinking, which more likely foregrounds attention to *moana*; seeing small atomised atolls above water is, arguably, a very northern way of looking at the immense ocean which interconnects all it envelops (Hau‘ofa 1994; Havea 2021). But the point here is that not even an apparently northern way of seeing and thinking about things led to the inclusion of Pasifika perspectives in initial explorations of the feast proposal.

1 James Bhagwan of the Pacific Council of Churches was an invited speaker in March 2024 and was again invited to a second event in Assisi ‘convened by various Catholic institutes and universities’ on 6–7 December 2024.

Southern Experience of Liturgical Seasons

‘The Whole Mystery’?

At the head of the document proposing a new Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, a quote from the Roman Catholic Church’s liturgy document from the Second Vatican Council sits alongside lines from the prologue of John’s gospel. The gospel text is John 1:1, 3: ‘In the beginning was the Word... [through whom] all things came to be’. The portion from Vatican II captures the idea that in each yearly cycle the church’s calendar ‘unfolds the whole mystery of Christ’ (SC ¶102).

The gospel text speaks for itself as inspiration of the Nicene Creed’s affirmation of all things having being made through Christ—in John, ‘the Word’. Notably, these Johannine verses also have had a liturgical use in Roman Catholic liturgy, not only as the gospel reading for the first service of Christmas (as they are in each of the three years of the RCL), but also, until Vatican II, as what was known as ‘the last gospel’ recited at the end of mass, perhaps by the priest in recessional, as a way of pointing back to the beginning. The liturgical function of the last gospel is to suggest that in some small way, all common worship points back to the creation of the cosmos.

Notably, the feast proposal uses SC’s claim that the liturgical calendar ‘unfolds the whole mystery of Christ’ in each yearly cycle as a point of critique. The document goes on to point out that in fact the whole mystery is *not* represented, which is what the new feast is seeking to make good.²

Lectionary Linked to Calendar

To set these observations in wider context, it should be appreciated that the RCL, as the Lectionary for Mass, is entirely developed around seasons (see Bradshaw and Johnson 2011). Two cycles operate: first, the ‘Christmas cycle’: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and secondly the ‘Easter cycle’: Lent and Easter through to Pentecost. Outside these two cycles, many churches refer to the remaining part of the year as ‘Ordinary Time’. However, this ‘ordinary’ period is punctuated by other significant days, with Trinity and All Saints Day being among the most important. These patterns mean that even where the liturgical calendar is not fully observed—as it may not be to its full extent in some Protestant contexts—Bible readings being heard if the RCL is being followed nevertheless *presume this calendar* with its cycle of liturgical seasons and feast days.

2 It is salutary also to remember that the biblical material itself, at least in its current editorial forms in received canons, may not always be fully helpful—a point underscored by Margeret Barker’s studies reconstructing the vision of creation manifest in the liturgies of Jerusalem’s first temple: ‘Many Christians have been searching for a comprehensive and characteristically Christian theology for the environment crisis because the knowledge of angels and the vision of wisdom have been lost’ (Barker 2010, 288). Barker’s speculative proposals about the first temple are a powerful provocation to question how the Bible has been and is being received and adapted, for better or worse.

Furthermore, what is not always appreciated—either in the north or the south it seems—is that the liturgical calendar’s cycle of seasons is fused with northern climatic patterns. While the origins both Easter and Christmas yield different theories about some of their details—about which much exists to be read, as these are major foci in liturgical studies—much less attention has been generated as to how the climatic patterns with which they link are out-of-kilter in much of the world (see e.g. Johnson 2009; Pilcher 2009).

Calendar Linked to Northern Seasons: Easter and Equinox, Christmas, and Solstice

To highlight the point: in many places in the North, Lent corresponds to lengthening days—Lent of course means ‘to lengthen’. Then Easter comes with the bursting to new life of nature that comes in springtime. The date of Easter each year is always determined in relation to a northern spring equinox; it falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, regulated by a superficial set date for the latter, 21 March. So, to state the obvious, Easter is not in the *Southern* spring.

The origins of Christmas are a little more complex but are to do with early Christian engagement with either (or both) pagan traditions of Saturnalia in the days following 17 December or Talmudic ideas about how greatness manifests in human life.

Saturnalia was a Roman festival involving anticipation of the northern winter solstice, and the date set for Christmas Day quite likely intended to symbolise that light comes with the birth of Jesus. But as Saturnalia was a festival of excess and debauchery, Christian traditions came to emphasise judgement in this period, as reflected in the ancient ‘Advent O’ antiphons, popularised in the eighth century and still used in many churches. In the antiphons, Christ is presented in images drawn from Hebrew scripture, such as Wisdom, root of Jesse, key of David, radiant dawn, and so on, with these allied to exhortations which enjoin obedience to law and turning from evil. In various ways, then, the solstice was key to both determining the date of Christmas and to sifting the scriptural images which come into play on these days in the Christmas cycle.

In an alternative—or complementary—theory of the origins of Christmas, Jewish rather than pagan traditions are more prevalent. 25 December may have been determined as the date of Christmas because it was imaginatively linked to the celebration of the Annunciation marked on 25 March, which in turn was understood to have taken place on the day in the Jewish month of Nisan when Jesus died (thought to be 14 Nisan). Whereas Talmudic teachings suggested that ‘great’ people died on the same day in the annual calendar as their birth years before, early Christian witness to Jesus deliberately twisted this Jewish idea to make the affirmation that Jesus could be seen as even greater

than great people because his death, distinctively, was not on the same calendar day as his *birth* but on the same calendar day as his (miraculous) *conception*.

Calendar Clash

Whatever weight might be given to either of these theories about the origins of Christmas, in the north at last, after the day set for celebration of the birth of Christ, Christmas Day, light spreads—the creation itself thus seems to give praise. But in many parts of the south, the links between northern equinoxes, solstices and seasons are reversed, dislodged, weak, if not entirely topsy-turvy. *Easter is not in spring, Lent is not a time of lengthening days, Christmas does not yield new light, and Advent is not marked by darkness*. Indeed, northern seasons do not map onto much southern experience at all.

‘Ikani Lātu Fakasi’i’eiki suggests that in the Tongan context the word for ‘year’, *ta’u*, also refers to the yam crop, and that ‘before Europeans arrived in Tonga [...] the system for counting the times of year was different’, to do with growing and harvesting the yam crop (2011, 132). Out of his Fijian experience, Sevati Tuwere (2023) gives great detail about how different periods constitute *caka yabaki* (‘year making’), and are much to do with gardening. Tuwere explains how three seasons exist: *vula ko sakalo*, six months long beginning in September, lately called spring, in which fruits flower and fish spawn; then *vula i matua*, the season of maturity mapping onto March and April; and the third season then runs to September and is preoccupied with garden preparation (Tuwere 2023). Tuwere provides many details of what occurs in the natural environment within each of these three seasons, their smaller turns as it were, but most strikingly he depicts ‘time’ as ‘a place’, a place ‘in which one waits’, together part of ‘a relationship that traces its origin to a divine source’ (2023, 39). From islands now known as Australia, Garry Deverell identifies no less than seven ‘Indigenous seasons’ largely determined by attention to local flora and fauna and the animals that feed from and among them in the Narm (Melbourne) region: luk eel, warring wombat, guling orchid, poorneet tadpole, buath gurra grass, kangaroo apple, and biderap dry seasons (2023, 29–30). Each of these examples suggest how local experiences in the south may have very little to do with either the presumed ‘four seasons’ that prevail in northern imagination or the church’s liturgical seasons drawing at least aspects of their supposed meanings from the northern patterns.

Problems of Polarising Darkness and Light

Yet the ongoing strength of Northern traditions can be seen by noting how light and darkness imagery is so pervasive in every single one of the Church of England (CofE)’s *Common Worship*’s prayer services for the Christmas cycle (CofE 2005). Among many examples, the services assure worshippers that ‘the dawn from high is breaking upon us /

to dispel the lingering shadows of night' (CofE 2005, 198), and they exhort worshippers to 'cast off the works of darkness / and put on the armour of light' (CofE 2005, 201).³ As in these examples, many of the texts they put into play are themselves direct quotations from scripture, and that in turn confirms how lectionary and calendar merge, with scriptures being chosen according to season. But the *Common Worship* services also show that however scriptures for reading in a service may be selected for their connection to the season, so too selections according to season deeply shape the rest of the service. Yet the idea that darkness forms southern experience of Advent is little more than ridiculous. The Church of England's Christmas cycle services do not travel well. But then the nonsense of such prayer in the blazing height of summer pales compared to the dangerous racist correlation of light with goodness or divinity, then of darkness with sin, which use of such scriptures perpetuates and normalises but should be rejected (see Jagessar and Burns 2011; Burns 2022). At the very least, how 'the whole mystery of Christ' may be being 'unfolded' through different experience of seasons invites some serious suspicion.

Appreciation of the New Feast

Against this background, it can be noted with appreciation that the proposed ecumenical Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos has one strong merit. That is, it advocates *a christological feast that, unlike Christmas and Easter, is detached from northern seasons*.⁴ The Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos is *not* determined in relation to northern equinox, solstice, or seasons. As such it represents *a new dimension in many liturgical calendars*, and this might well be welcomed in the south. However, an Oceanic voice could have more to say...

Oceanic Experience of 'Creation'

Whose Anxieties?

A very notable feature of the new feast proposal is its concern to distinguish between what

3 *Common Worship* Christmas-cycle services have a lot of this language: 'the dawn from high [] breaking upon us / to dispel the lingering shadows of night' (CofE 2005, 198), 'cast[ing] off the works of darkness / and put[ting] on the armour of light' (201), 'cast[ing] away the works of darkness' (204), 'reveal[ing] among us the light of your presence' (205), 'the light of your presence' (again) (205), 'a lantern to our feet / and a light upon our path' (205), 'deliverance [that] shines out like the dawn' (215), 'people who walked in darkness hav[ing] seen a great light' (216), 'dwell[ling] in a land of deep darkness' (216), 'darkness [] passing away and the true light [] already shining' (217), 'call[ing] us out of darkness / into his marvellous light' (219, 225), 'dispel[ling] the darkness' (220), 'the light of the world' (220), 'deliver[ing] us from the dominion of darkness' (222), 'light [that] has come' (228), 'night [that] still covers the earth, and darkness the peoples' (228), 'Christ as light to the nations' (232), 'call[ing] us into your marvellous light' (232), 'arise, shine, for your light has come' (235).

4 Most likely this is unwitting, given that I had an email from a member of the feast proposal team to me on 9 February 2024 making the comment about my observation of the feast being de-linked from northern patterns: "hadn't thought of that."

it calls the *action* of creation and the *result* of creation. To highlight the difference, the proposal notes that ‘in Italian a helpful distinction is made by coining specific words for two distinct meanings of “Creation”’: *‘la Creazione’* which ‘primarily stands for God’s *act* of creation of the cosmos, i.e., Creation as theological mystery (*creatio* in Latin)’ and *‘il Creato’* which stands for the *result* of the act of creation, the fruit of *la Creazione*, i.e., Creation as the created universe, or everything created (*cuncta creata* in Latin)’. The proposal adds that ‘Naturally, both meanings are intimately connected (with *il Creato* also serving as our main door to meditate on the mystery of *la Creazione*)’. But it also warns that ‘the Feast of Creation is sometimes misinterpreted as a mere celebration of *il Creato* that misses the significance of *la Creazione*’ (Laudato Si’ Research Institute 2023).

The proposal reads as anxious to avoid collapsing distinctions between creator and creation, or about giving room to perspectives such as panentheism. So, the proposed feast is very emphatically a christological feast—its focus is Jesus, not ‘everything created’. While this may well be regarded as laudable from the point of view of much Christian theology, it might also be considered that in its stress on its distinction the feast proposal may have sidelined or otherwise determined not to draw much upon some previous attempts to amend liturgical calendars to incorporate a focus on creation. It would seem that (albeit without direct criticism, but rather via neglect to mention) these have been deemed to be too vulnerable to focus on creation itself, rather than the divine act of creating. And although evidently some participants at the Assisi conference were aware of some distinctive Australian initiatives about a ‘Season of Creation’ that predates the feast proposal, the Australian initiative is one which the new feast proposal does not engage.

The Australian-led Season of Creation

The ‘Season of Creation’ is a longstanding project, begun in 2001 by a synod (Victoria and Tasmania) of the Uniting Church in Australia. While Uniting in its institutional affiliation, the project was, however, spearheaded by Australian Lutheran biblical scholar, Norman Habel. Moreover, over time it has attracted quite strong ecumenical engagement, including by Catholic dioceses. With a website⁵ (albeit not updated since 2021) as a key means of dissemination, the project has also yielded numerous books, most notably *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* (Habel et al. 2011) while also having more informal connection—in part through Habel’s own involvement—with a series of biblical commentaries, the Earth Bible Commentary (and its forebear, The Earth Bible Volume).

Materials in the Season of Creation project do forgo some of the precision (persnicketies?) of the more recent ecumenical feast proposal. For example, rather than claiming that, or questioning, whether the liturgical calendar unfolds the whole mystery

5 <https://seasonofcreation.com>

of Christ, they note in a more pedestrian way, ‘for the most part, the seasons of the church year follow the life of Jesus’ while lacking focus on ‘God the Creator’. However, the materials go on to make their own strong argument that while liturgy has tended to focus on human relationship to God and human relationships with one another, ‘it is now time to turn our attention to God’s relationship with all creation and with our relationship with creation (and with God through creation)’ (Habel et al. 2011, 3). Hence, the project intends to ‘bring [] the celebration of Earth fully into the orbit of Christian worship as a natural and integral part of the church year’ (Habel et al. 2011, 5). The idea of a ‘season’ of creation emerges as key to the project in its provision for four Sundays of the liturgical calendar to serve as a kind of ‘Creation Time’ (akin to ‘Ordinary Time’). The project does not set four specific Sundays but does note that while the season might fall at any point, for various reasons practice has developed of holding it between ‘Creation Day on September 1st’ (since ‘in 1999, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios 1 of Constantinople declared September 1 to be Creation Day’) and St Francis of Assisi’s sanctorale day on the 4 October.

Introductory material on the Season of Creation also includes some specific but minimal reflection on ‘connecting with Christ’. Of the Johannine prologue, for example, it suggests that ‘in one of the most radical assertions of the Gospels, John declares that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). In other words, God “became flesh.” And flesh is composed of water, air, and soil—the basic stuff of Earth. So, the Word became a part of Earth’ (Habel et al. 2011, 65). It also suggests that questions such as the following be asked whatever scriptures are read:

Does the text point to Christ and the origins of creation or continuing creation? Does the text point to Christ suffering with and for creation? Does the text connect with Christ forgiving sins, including environmental sins? Does the text reveal the presence of the risen and cosmic Christ reconciling all creation? (Habel et al. 2011, 64–65)

Oceanic Perspectives—Land

Whatever some people’s apparent reserve about insufficient clarity about Christ in the Season of Creation project, I contend that the new feast proposal’s distinction between act(or) and result of creation needs to respect Oceanic perspectives that are outside western dualistic categories, and moreover, may not have neglected creation in ways that both Season of Creation and the new ecumenical feast proposal agree that Christian traditions have. Hence, in this section of my reflections—the heart of my contribution—I assemble some perspectives that I think need more engagement by the northern and western churches proposing the new feast. I take encouragement from the like of Arthur

Walker-Jones's call for 'honour[ing] the wisdom of cultures of Oceania by allowing it to critique and supplement' western views (Walker-Jones 2001, 84) and from Upolu Lumā Vaai's (2020, 209) challenge to abandon 'the dominant old colonial pathological *narrative of onefication*' that prevails in much ecumenical discussion (after John 17: 21). Instead of oneness, Vaai (2020) lifts up the image of a varied 'household'—notable for also being biblically based (e.g. Galatians 6:10).

Here, then, are some Oceanic voices that I think are relevant to consideration of the ecumenical feast proposal. To begin with, Sevati Tuwere (2023) links time and place, and this is just one insight into the centrality of land in Pasifika cultures with profound implications for calendar. As Tuwere underscores, the Fijian *vanua*, Māori *whenua*, Samoan *fanua*, Tahitian *fenua* and Tongan *fonua* all have parallel meanings related to womb/placenta, and these meanings are bolstered by a common practice of planting coconut trees at the place where a newborn person's umbilical cord is buried (2023, 36; for further profound examples, see Pilcher and Kivi 2023, 512–14). So, not only time but people are powerfully related to land. Among many of Tuwere's examples, in Fijian culture, strong connection to land is also indicated by the practice of *i cavuti*, identifying oneself by speaking of 'belonging within certain frontiers', and meaning 'belong to', 'being owned'. This is such that 'One does not own the land; the land owns [you]. [People] and land are one. [People] derive [their] names and therefore [their] basic constitution as a human being from the *vanua*, which means both turf and people' (Tuwere 2023, 49). Moreover, 'without the people, the *vanua* is like a body without a soul. The expression *sa wawa tiko na vanua* (the land is waiting) means the people are waiting' (Tuwere 2023, 35)—an expression which relates to what Tuwere says about calendar.

Western imaginations may well be stretched by such worldviews. But my point here is that the ecumenical feast proposal reflects *nothing* of such Pasifika perspectives. While the feast proposal is concerned about avoiding dualism—distinctions between creator and creation—what Tuwere and others suggest is that appreciation of what the proposal calls 'creation' may be more complex than the proposal yet conceives. Not only may human persons be more deeply implicated in land than western imagination has grasped, but the land may also be more related to its 'divine source' than the spheres deemed separate in western thought. There is a very important opportunity here for western churches to listen and learn from Christians in Oceania.

On this point, one might also ponder Larrika theologian Wali Fejo (the first First Nations person to lead Nungalinya College in the Northern Territory of Australia) and his writing about land as 'mother, provider, keeper' (Fejo 2000). It is to be looked after as a mother, just as in its turn the land looks after the people of the land. Yet, Fejo asserts, land is also 'within' the First Peoples, such is the strength of connection. Fejo's insights

also embrace the idea that ‘every rock is an extension of Ulura’ (2000, 141), and that God ‘is in the Earth’ such that ‘God is as close as the ground on which we walk’ (2000, 146). In considering the flood narrative of Genesis, he stresses that when Earth flooded, God was ‘not at a distance on some cloud watching’ but rather under the waters, so that when the ark landed on the rock it landed on God. Moreover, in the covenant signalled by the rainbow of the story, ‘God makes the same personal promises to kangaroos and crocodiles, to turtles and beetles, as to human beings’, as the rainbow itself is a ‘revelation of the Rainbow Spirit’ (Fejo 2000, 143), *Kurraj*, emerging from Earth.

Fejo’s focus on water in the flood story is also a portal into Oceanic perspectives that ‘land’ itself refers to more than the atolls that peek above waterlines but includes both sky and sea as well. In his own Pasifika turning of the creation story, Jione Havea can therefore assert that ‘out of the waters of mighty ocean, baby Earth was born’ (2011, 180).

Tuwere, Fejo, Havea—and plenty of others—articulate ways of thinking that *defy* western categories in place in the feast proposal. But might the new feast proposal not provide some opportunity to reconsider what documents towards the new feast present as having space between what Oceanic wisdom suggests may be more fluid? *Might the new feast proposal’s recognition that the whole mystery of Christ is not in fact manifest in the current calendar lead to and yield to further insight that wisdom has been missed?* How might people of the land be heard in ways the new feast proposal does not yet seem to have heard them? Western Christians fretful about ‘doctrine’ might also choose to follow the clue in Winston Halapua’s reading of land as he hints at the ‘triune interconnectedness of the vast ocean, the sky and the dotted scattered islands’ (2008, 5; see also Tomlinson 2020, 88),⁶ which is to say that perhaps Christian doctrine may be revitalised rather than threatened by engaging with what may initially seem strange to western minds in Pasifika worldviews.⁷

The Fault

The basic fault in the ecumenical feast proposal seems to me to be that it continues to *operate—albeit as it does not explicitly espouse—a doctrine of terra nullius*, ‘empty land’. It overlooks Oceania. In early waves of conquest, local practice of land-care—which did not look like western practice of agriculture—led Europeans to assume that Oceanic places

6 Note also Deverell 2023, 16–18: albeit eschewing inherited idioms, not the Father, but ‘universal dreaming’, not the Son but ‘Country’, not the Spirit, but ‘primordial pattern’.

7 We know that Pasifika perspectives are rarely present in theologies even in the larger islands of Oceania. For a disturbing account of the sheer lack of Pasifika insight in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand theological journals, see Flett 2022. Given what Flett shows, it is hardly surprising that the same perspectives make no impact on the feast proposals of western elite groups.

were empty. In more recent geopolitics, Pasifika people were again disregarded in the so-called Pacific War leading to devastating testing of nuclear weapons and storage of nuclear waste in the region (Vaka'uta 2019, 213; Havea 2019). And while the new ecumenical feast proposal might look more peace-making than these colonial legacies, in it again Pasifika appear to be disregarded. Yet as Nāsili Vaka'utu insists, 'Oceania is not empty!' (2019, 113).

In the feast proposal, the Pacific and its people have been flown over (Vaka'utu 2019, 113), over-sighted (Havea 2009), and are unheard. They have been assumed to be able to be spoken for by others—in the North and West.⁸ Most egregiously, despite aspirations to read the signs of the times, Pasifika experience of going under water has not been invoked but should have been (Carroll 2020; 2021; Havea 2020, especially 68–70 with disturbing photographs of both maternity ward and burial ground submerged). We will only know more about 'the whole mystery' as more Oceanic voices speak up.

8 One particularly lamentable moment in the feast proposal conference was when a contributor from the United States suggested that the first Sunday of September would be an unsuitable day for the new feast, given that it clashes with a US holiday. This comment seemed to speak to the question of who the feast is intended for, at least in its present articulation.

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