

“Others are enjoying life from our death”
Eco-Relational Theology and a Methodist Ecological Revolution in Oceania

Upolu Lumā Vaai¹

(Paper presented at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies
Pembroke College, Oxford University, UK)

Abstract

Studying many works of Wesleyan theology has confirmed for me that there are very few writings about the ‘primacy of relationality’ and about how John Wesley used such framework to inform his theology and praxis. Oceania Methodists² today struggle to answer the question. ‘How will Wesley’s theology respond to a colonial take-over of our lands, oceans, and peoples?’ Unlimited material growth is now the true obsession of postmodernity at the expense of God’s creation. Can Oceanic Methodists contribute to an alternative narrative that restores the harmony of the multiplicity of relationships? Can they create an ecological revolution?

This paper attempts to reconstruct an eco-relational theology to argue that the concept of relationality is not only at the heart of the Triune God, it is also at the heart of the Wesleyan revival. The aim is to ground theologically a Methodist ecological revolution within the spaces that Volker Boege calls “conflict and climate change hotspots in the Pacific”.³ In this

¹ Head of Theology & Ethics and Associate Professor at the Pacific Theological College, Suva, Fiji Islands.

² (1) Oceania does not replace the name Pacific, but rather redefines it. Oceania is a region whose identity is found not in the isolated ‘islands in the sea’ but rather in the interconnectedness and interrelation of the ‘sea of islands’, according to Epeli Hauofa, “The Ocean in Us”, in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2008). Islands and islanders have always been shaped and redefined through centuries by the ocean. In this oceanic redefinition, islands are both divided and undivided, both united yet separate and distinctive. It is in this relational identity of Oceania that makes the Pacific a liquid continent that is both rich in cultures and increasingly vulnerable. (2) The designation of ‘many Methodisms’ depends on their locations and ethnicities. See Allan K. Davidson, “Telling the Methodist Story in the South Pacific: History and Identity”, in *Weaving the Unfinished Mats: Wesley’s Legacy—Conflict, Confusion and Challenge in the South Pacific*, edited by Peter Lineham (Auckland: Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society Conference, 2007), 41f.

³ Volker Boege, *Climate Change and Conflict in Oceania: Challenges, Responses, and Suggestions for a Policy-Relevant Research Agenda*, Policy Brief No. 17 (Japan: Toda Peace Institute, 2018).

way help equip Methodists to contribute, constructively, from a Wesleyan perspective, by finding sustainable alternatives that will save the region in the midst of its colonial take-over. For such a task, this paper argues that it is critical to rediscover the ‘primacy of relationality’ that is fundamental both to Wesley’s theology that informed his ‘ground-up’ paradigm of life, as well as to the Oceanic indigenous worldview.

Disembodiment and Pacific Methodism

For those in vulnerable and defenseless places such as the small island communities of Oceania, there is a desperate need for theologies that reconsider the importance of their values of respecting cosmic relationships and interconnectedness. This comes as a response to an urgent call by islanders to find an ‘alternative ground-up paradigm’ for life. With regard to one of my brothers from Tuvalu, an island in Oceania whose highest point is only 3 meters, this response is urgent as “others are enjoying life from our death”⁴ – the kind of slow death made possible by unlimited production without ethical limits and reinforced by a human-centric neo-liberal capitalist system. Like water flowing into everything, filling every crack and gap of life, the ingrained neo-liberal ‘paradigm of growth’ is offering more ecological death than sustainability, and Methodists are either normalizing such a paradigm, allowing it to shape the Oceanic political, economic, social, and religious landscapes, or treating it as not a part of their theological agenda. Making things difficult is that the focus on Wesley’s theology which would inform critically ecological, especially climate change discourse, is still been given very minimal attention in the regional and the global arena. The result is the inability of many to deal with a destructive economic development narrative that allows for ecological violence and destruction.

⁴ Falemanuka Maitoga, “Climate Change in Tuvalu”, Presentation, ‘Theology of Disasters’ class, Pacific Theological College, Suva, Fiji, 2017.

“Christian faith is always *embodied* faith” argues Andrew Walls if Christianity is to make a definitive difference in Oceania.⁵ But the very struggle for Oceanic Methodism to critique the mainstream development narrative is due to ‘disembodiment’.⁶ When a faith is not fully embodied in the contextual *itulagi*⁷ of the believer, the Oceanic cultures and contexts which inform their thinking and life, then faith becomes more and more a heavenly business. The risks are not only the abstract speculation and misunderstanding of such faith but also an uncritical submission to a church tradition that has limited or no resources for dealing with the real painful ecological stories of the marginal communities. This ‘meaning-making’ strategy must also go beyond the notion of ‘relevancy’ in which inculcation and contextual theologies have been mired. The faith that we seek to understand more deeply must also be able to provide a rethinking and revolutionary environment that promotes the courage to speak against the destructive and painful colonial hegemonies, both past and present, of the marginal communities. An environment where we, in the light of the subversive God of faith, are able to “hear their cry” in the midst of a loud human-centric culture and “know their suffering” in the midst of an institutionalized system of power (Exodus 3:7).

Disembodiment is one of the greatest challenges that the Pacific people faces today. Especially with a region that has developed a dependent mentality not only on imported

⁵ Andrew Walls, “Theology and Broader Reflections, Methodists, Missions and Pacific Christianity: A New Chapter in Christian History”, in *Weaving the Unfinished Mats*, 14.

⁶ Upolu Luma Vaai, “Itiiti a lega mea—Less yet More! A Pacific Relational Development Paradigm of Life”, in *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi*, eds. Upolu Luma Vaai and Aisake Casimira (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2017), 219f.

⁷ *Itulagi* is a Samoan word which literally means ‘side of the heavens’. Any perspective is defined by one’s side or contextual lifeworld. A person has many *itu* or sides that make up one’s side of the heavens. These *itu* constitute the ‘baggage’ that conditions one’s thinking, including culture, family, religion, people, land, ancestors, ocean, language, spirits, even the *tuālagi* (universe). Recognising these diverse realities that make up our lifeworlds suggests that our consciousness always operates in a world of meanings that is culturally and historically conditioned. These *itu* make up ‘the context’ out of which we construct knowledge, experience life, and understand the world around them without fear of betrayal. Which is why every perspective is limited, because it is always from one’s ‘side of the heavens’.

goods, but also on introduced Eurocentric constitutional democracies.⁸ Disembodiment is a colonial construct. Colonisation is rooted in the word ‘colon’, which in both Latin and Greek means a ‘digestive system’. Colonialism is when ‘one’ person, community, or organisation, desires to solidify a digestive system that consumes more power, more money, more wealth, and more resources at the expense of the many, including the natural environment.⁹

Disembodiment is the manifestation of the colonial ‘one truth ideology’, with an emphasis on only one digestive centre of thinking, one digestive way of doing things, and one digestive interpretation of God.¹⁰ When Christianity was struggling to make sense of the divine incarnation of Jesus Christ within the Greco-Roman empire dominated by the ‘one truth ideology’, the result was that Christian theology and its philosophical mechanistic and monarchical orientation became the comfortable home for such ideology with the church as its breeding ground.¹¹ Consequently in such theology, God has to be understood ‘outside’ of the local body. Anything that emerges from the local, shaped by the body-relational thinking of the Oceanic lifeworld for instance, should either be condemned or put to the test according to Eurocentric Christian standards. For centuries, theological education in Oceania promoted the idea that only when a local thinking or theology is validated by a Eurocentric set of standards can it becomes universally accepted. The Christian missions, including Methodism, who introduced this top-down approach have gone, but their popularity continue to digest Oceanic mindsets.

Two things happen as a result. First it somehow limits the flow of God’s free grace embracing that which is indigenous and local. It sees grace flowing only from the heaven of

⁸ Graham Hassall, “Democracy in the Pacific: Tensions Between Systems and Lifeworld”, in *A Region in Transition: Politics and Power in Pacific Island Countries*, edited by A. Holtz, M. Kawasch and O. Hasenkamp (Saarbrücken: Saarland University Press, 2016), 313.

⁹ Upolu Luma Vaai, “Introduction”, in *Relational Hermeneutics*, 9f.

¹⁰ See Upolu Luma Vaai, “A Theology of Talalasi: Challenging the ‘One Truth Ideology’ of the Empire”, *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 55 (2016):50-62.

¹¹ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 17f.

institutional power to the earth of marginal communities. Hence while grace should be at work in what Joerg Rieger calls ‘situations of pressure’¹², or preferably situations of ecological pressure, it eventually found a comfortable safe home within the theological and hermeneutical traditioning of the church.

Free grace was the Wesleyan subversive take of the kind of disembodiment that occurred during his time where God is boxed according to standards and criteria set by dry Christian orthodoxy. Hence the marginal communities with which Wesley was concerned were taught that accessibility to this God is something that the church alone can offer. Secondly it set the stage for the organised eroding of the cosmological and eco-relational worldview of the Oceanic communities in the name of a universal God and the centrality of the human being.

Disembodiment is particularly obvious when it comes to Methodism’s long focus on the ‘saving of souls’. Many Methodists have translated this missional focus to be human-centric. Oceania today is overwhelmed with many issues that find their roots in a human-centric economic development paradigm that does not recognize any ecological soul. Most governments in the region have normalized the idea of borrowing capitalist economic models rooted in the ‘more is better’ paradigm that promote an endless extractive obsession at the expense of all other cosmic relationships. A community that worships and serves Caesar, the ‘life-taking’ god of the market empire rather than the ‘life-giving’ God of Jesus Christ.¹³ With the notion of ‘life-taking’ directly or indirectly shaping every part of our development consciousness, we, who follow this market god no longer feel grief, love, or suffering.

¹² Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (USA: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Church of America, 2018), 1. For a deeper delving into Rieger’s work on grace, see also his book, *Grace Under Pressure: Negotiating the Hearth of the Methodist Tradition* (USA: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Church of America, 2011).

¹³ Joerg Rieger, *Jesus vs Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 1ff.

Because of this we no longer mourn the severe distortions caused by the commodification of God-given gifts such as land, ocean, rivers, animals, and trees. We no longer feel that ‘life-taking’ is a sin because it is not only structured physically with the help of policies and legal frameworks but also psychologically. According to Pope Francis, “we have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters”¹⁴. When we lose remembrance, especially the memory of deep connection, we lose what it means to ‘live *within our means*’. As a result, we carry everyday the sin of ‘living *beyond our means*’. It is a sin because we no longer recognize others in our lives by taking life away from them to consolidate our own. There is no higher purpose than just living for ourselves. This is a more serious and organized crime orchestrated against the poor and marginal communities which we often warrant with political and religious justification as well as allow it a system and context to cultivate.

The desire for wealth without ethical limits has inevitably contributed to a vulnerable region that is overwhelmed by environmental issues, climate injustice, policies that marginalize indigenous people from their lands and resources, militarization and political colonization, the rapid pace of poverty and unemployment, the culture of resource extraction as in the recent threat of deep-sea mining in PNG (the first in the world), and the undeniable presence in the region of rich countries such as China who heavily invest in countries addicted to debt yet without the means to pay back these debts. The challenge is: how can Wesley’s theology inform an alternative paradigm that is able to re-modify human development within the contours of eco-relationality?

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul’s Publications, 2015), 10.

It is a risky business to link current thinking with Wesley's theology, especially if he did not appeal to eco-relationality as part of his theological vocabulary. Some would argue that we should be careful about imposing our contemporary thinking on Wesley because the non-human world was not on his theological agenda.¹⁵ However what is even riskier is if this tendency would prevent Methodists from taking risks in constant theological renewal. The challenge for Methodism today is the taking of risks, especially the 'linking of time-space', if Methodism is to remain within the category of the 3Rs: *revivalist*, *reformist*, and *revolutionist*. A risk that is not about the imposing of the new on the old, but rather about refreshing the old with the new.

Two things are worth considering if we want an embodied Methodism. Firstly although relationality was not part of Wesley's language, at the heart of his theology was his faith in the relationality of God as expressed in God's free grace for 'all'. His emphasis on social religion and social holiness, which appears across all of this theological thinking, testifies to this fundamental truth. To Wesley, "the gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness".¹⁶ While I personally do not like the word 'social' as it immediately invites a dichotomy between the social and the private, nevertheless, Wesley's focus was that "social religion is a matter of being in *relationship* with God and with others, and it is a public matter".¹⁷ The 'primacy of relationality' is the underlying principle of social religion. His Catholic, Reformed, Anglican, Eastern Orthodoxy, Pietist, and Arminian traditions all shaped him to speak of the 'relational terms of salvation'.¹⁸ That salvation is

¹⁵ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 200.

¹⁶ John and Charles Wesley, "List of Poetical Works", cited by Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion*, vii.

¹⁷ Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion*, viii. Italics my emphasis.

¹⁸ For a further understanding of how these traditions shaped Wesley's theological career, see Jason E. Vickers, "Wesley's Theological Emphases", in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190ff.

about having right relationship with God and with the neighbour. And for Wesley, God is the author and initiator of such relationships.

Secondly, if Methodism is to answer to the cry of the Oceanic marginal communities that “*others are enjoying life from our death*”, the way to make sure Wesley’s theology provides a constructive response is to reframe it in a contextual hermeneutical perspective. Relational hermeneutics allows the present receiver, such as the Oceanic marginal communities, to reconstruct and creatively reproduce Wesley’s theology addressing their plight yet being critical of their own contexts so that what is received is not so much a theological idea from the past but rather the living God of faith.

The Ecological Misconception

Fighting for eco-justice is a challenge, especially because when many of us talk about relationship or relationality, our mindsets immediately go straight to either God-human relationship or basically to inter-human relationships. The multiple non-human relationships are often relegated as secondary to God-human relationship. Hence most of the literature and scholarship about relationality produced in and from the West mainly concern the human-centric, which is why sometimes the eco-relational worldview is either misunderstood or condemned by Western academics.

For example, sometimes eco-relationality with its principles, such as sacredness and connectedness of all things, is misjudged and selectively labeled by some to belong to ‘dark green religion’ or to ‘environmentalism’ that worships the environment rather than God.¹⁹ While I agree that the notion of interconnectedness can sometimes be twisted to serve

¹⁹ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2010), ix-x.

communality at the expense of individuality, or sometimes be bent for political reasons, this claim ignores the fact that this is not about worship, but rather about ‘deep connection’ and continuity. It is the vulnerable peoples and places in small island marginal communities such as Oceania who first feel the impact of climate change and bear the heavy brunt of environmental violence.

While some recently produced relational theologies offer some glimpse of hope, again they are enslaved by the human-centric worldview. This is especially seen when the relationality of God is framed in what is often called in the West a ‘personalistic view of God’ over against an absolutistic view. Many Methodists would favour the former over the latter. However, while this view brings God closer to us to highlight love as central to the being of God, it also runs the risk of boxing God within a dominant human-centric cultural construct where the non-human world is viewed as secondary to the primacy of the God-human relationship.²⁰ We have to be cautious of personalising God to the extent of making God in our human image and then we turn around and worship that very image, a warning sounded by Justo González almost thirty years ago.²¹ This definitely runs the risk of neglecting the Holy Spirit that is foundational to Wesleyan spirituality, the very force that allows the Triune God to relate and intimately connected with all of creation.

It is also not enough to say, as Matthew Seaman claims, that “Wesley’s main focus was certainly on equality among humans, however, this can be extended to all creatures and

²⁰ See for example Barry L. Callen, “John Wesley and Relational Theology”, in *Relational Theology: A Contemporary Introduction*, edited by Brint Montgomery, Thomas J. Oord, and Karen Strand Winslow (Oregon: WIPF & STOCK), 7-10. In this book, the God-human relationship is highlighted with minimal treatment given to the natural environment, except for the last two chapters, which is often the case with many theology projects.

²¹ Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 90.

potentially all of earth”.²² This is still a problematic take of Wesley where the non-human world is treated as ‘an appendage’ or ‘an extension’ to a human-centric theology. In the eco-relational worldview, there is no such thing as ‘extensions’. We are all equally part of the eco-relational household where ‘life for all’ is at the heart of existence.

The basic question is: How can Wesley’s God become a God of all, rather than just humans? ‘All’ is Wesley’s magic word. How can we redefine this encompassing ‘allness’ to make sure we don’t confine Wesley’s theology to the human-centric? We need to firmly establish a theological response to environmental violence and destruction grounded on Wesley’s wealth of theological wisdom or else Methodists will continue to feel unsettled when environmental issues affect their societies.

Influenced by the dominant human-centric narrative, theology, especially eco-theology, has promoted that ecology refers ‘only’ to the non-human world. Therefore, God and the human being obviously exist ‘outside’ of ecology. Two reasons for such invention can be highlighted here. On the one hand, to protect God’s identity, God has to be theologically engineered in a way that any divine ‘deep involvement’ as part of the ecological structure has to be carefully considered or risk God’s divinity and power. In Wesley’s time, divine ‘deep involvement’ was deeply problematic due to the mechanistic philosophy of God, where the relational life-giving God of the Bible gradually lost its uniqueness in favour of a more Supreme Being who rules and judges the world from above.²³ In so doing, Christianity during Wesley’s time became a victim to what Wes-Howard Brook calls the ‘religion of the empire’²⁴, missing out

²² Mathew Seaman, “Dark Green Religion and the Wesleyan Tradition: Harmony and Dissonance”, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 48 (2013):135-148, see 142.

²³ Marc Otto and Michael Lodahl, “‘We Cannot Know Much, But We May Love Much’: Mystery and Humility in John Wesley’s Narrative Ecology”, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 44 (2009):118-140.

²⁴ Wes-Howard Brook, *Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced what Jesus Rejected*, Second-Firth Centuries (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

on what it really means by the Incarnation of God through Christ in the Spirit. To be a religion of the empire means to deny the contextual embodiment of God in different and diverse cultures. Against this anti-Incarnational and non-relational idea of God, Wesley instead brought back into the Church a more freely relational interactive God who is not confined to a centre of power or thinking. For Wesley, the grace of God is key to understanding divine ‘deep involvement’ and the Spirit makes that possible from beginning to end.

With the human being as the representative of this mechanistic God, its role has to be theologically engineered as the ‘overseer’ of the non-human world, something that was made popular since the scientific advancements of the Enlightenment. By giving that privilege to the human being, not only did the human being get special treatment apart from the non-human world, but because of this framing, economy slowly made a split from ecology. The former takes up the central role of managing the survival of humans while the latter becomes the resource that serves the needs of such survival.²⁵ Hence economy is now becoming an amoral machine that acts separately from ecology. The more it does, the more it becomes immoral.

Today, with the uncontrollable extraction by the human being of natural resources, another theology was proposed by the Church, the theology of stewardship, which suggests that humans should act as caretakers of ecology. What is now normalized in our mindsets is that stewardship is all about human acts of ‘fixing’ and/or ‘saving’ the natural environment. This can be done by exercising self-limitation for instance.²⁶ The problem with this view is that while we worry about ‘saving’ the natural environment, we are never ‘connected’ to it. The

²⁵ Vaai, “Itiiti a lega mea—Less yet More!”, in *Relational Hermeneutics*, 220-221.

²⁶ Sharon R. Harvey, “God’s Relation to Nature”, in *Relational Theology*, 113-115.

fundamental question is: Can we honestly take care of something that we are never connected to?

Eco-Relational Theology and Wesley

For an embodied Methodism, it is important to place Wesleyan theology within the contours of relational hermeneutics that informs the thinking of the Oceanic communities. Relational hermeneutics acknowledges the fact that relationality is the overaraching core value that encompasses all of life. However it is not limited to Oceania, for relationality being encompassing and holistic includes all multiple relationships including the natural environment. It is the interpretive key to life and wellbeing in the region. With such a complex and diverse region, relationality is translated and contextualized to fit all the contexts and lifeworlds of Oceania. Hence relationality has different ‘faces’ depending on its cultural and contextual location. Oceanic communities believe that relationality is not one-dimensional or human-centric. It is multidimensional and cosmological. It sees the world as a cosmic-community that includes God, human beings, others, and the environment. These are elusive constellations of embodied life.²⁷ While relationship focuses on connections, affiliations, bonds and ties, relationality focuses on the quality and ethical value of such relationships.

It is also important to acknowledge that the Oceanic cultures, like any other, are prone to corruption and colonial distortion. One must not overlook the fact that any culture can be maneuvered to prop-up the power structures of either a controlling majority or an influential minority. The role of relational hermeneutics is to encourage a critical, hermeneutical, and unified process of *liuliu* (deconstruction), *liliu* (reconstruction), and *toe liuliu* (return to restart

²⁷ For more on Pacific relationality, see Upolu Luma Vaai and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (eds), *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific* (Suva: University of the South Pacific and the Pacific Theological College, 2017).

the process).²⁸ These three hermeneutical phases are important for analyzing critically our constant changing cultures. This would give us confidence to say that what comes out of the local, shaped by the local communities' worldview, might not be the best but it is perhaps the most sustainable compared to what is borrowed. It is sustainable because it is borne from the ground-up worldviews of the marginal communities. However a critical hermeneutical process, where the role of the Spirit is central, must be put in place to critically examine this 'local turn'.

The reason why environmental destruction does not go down well with most indigenous communities, like those in Oceania, is because in their eco-relational worldview, the natural environment is perceived as their tino (body). For Oceanic indigenous people, the people and the earth can only exist in relation to the other. The earth is more than just a piece of dirt. It is family. It is 'in' us. The cosmic-community is 'in' us and we are 'in' the cosmic-community.²⁹ For example in Samoa, the word for soil (elele) is the same as the word for blood. The word for the earth (palapala) is also the same word for blood. *Ua tafe le palapala* (blood is spilled) means that earth loses life whenever there is bloodshed. The word for placenta (fanua) is the same as the word for land. The word for the rocks/stones (fatu) is the same word for the human heart. The word for the skies (lagi) is the same word for a human head. The word for roots of a tree (a'a) is the same word for human genealogy. The word for tongue (laulaufaiva) connotes distribution of resources rather than digestion. When the newborn's umbilical cord (pute) is severed, a ritual is performed to bury this in the ground to reconnect the newborn to the land of ancestors.

²⁸ Vaai and Casimira, *Relational Hermeneutics*, 23-24.

²⁹ Upolu Luma Vaai, "Vaatapalagi: De-Heavening Trinitarian Theology in the Islands", in *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Mark Brett and Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 48f.

This means that a human being is ecological through and through. There is no disconnection of earth and people. I am a walking land! A moving earth! As Fijians say, *tamata ni vanua, vanua ni tamata* (the land is the people and the people is the land) outlines this deep relationship of the people and the natural environment. Prof Epeli Hauofa from Tonga once coined a well-known phrase that ‘*We are the Ocean, the Ocean is Us*’.³⁰ Following Hauofa is Dr. Teresia Teaiwa who once said that ‘*we sweat and cry salt so we know that the ocean is really in our blood*’.³¹ Pope Francis calls this kind of deep connection “integral ecology” which allows us to see the earth as family. “Our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us”.³² For Oceanic communities, anything that is body-related, that they belong to, that is part of them, they will protect and care for it. This also goes with Christianity, including Methodism.

To reconstruct a theology of stewardship in the light of this thinking, means that the saving of the natural environment through self-limitation and all other stewardship acts, cannot work unless we feel we are intimately part of what we’re trying to save. Our mindsets need to shift from the stewardship idea of ‘caring *for*’ the earth that has dominated Eurocentric theology into ‘living *with*’ the earth. In the Oceanic eco-relational perspective, relating precedes the caring. Honest and empathetic stewarding means that once we (re)find that intimate emotional and spiritual connection through ‘living *with*’ the earth, the ‘caring *for*’ should follow. Stewardship is about ‘deep connection’ that is always spiritual in nature. To ‘be there’ and ‘be caring’ for the earth should start with the resolve to ‘be with’. We can only honestly love and care for the earth if we are deeply connected to it.

³⁰ Epeli Hauofa, “Our Sea of Islands”, in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering our Sea of Islands* (Suva: The University of the South Pacific).

³¹ Teresia Teaiwa, quoted by Epeli Hauofa, “The Ocean in Us”, 41.

³² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 1 and 16.

Eco-relationality maintains that while the individual is ‘en-othered’ (by moving towards the neighbour including the natural environment) it still enjoys real freedom to be oneself. And while the community is ‘en-selfed’ (by affirming individual identities) it still enjoys real freedom as a community. This ‘en-otherness’ of the one and the ‘en-selfness’ of the many (including the environment) is a Trinitarian structure of life that is part of many indigenous cultures and worldviews. Hence the Trinity is not a mere doctrine. It is a way of being and life already present in our everyday en-selfness and en-otherness, grounded in the relationality of God through Christ in the Spirit. In the eco-relational worldview, God does not divide the sacred and secular, spirit and flesh, or church and the world as we usually do. Eco-relationality means that Trinitarian relationship is wholly part of our everyday eco-relationships. There is no such thing as intra-Trinitarian relationship ‘in God’ (Immanent Trinity) as opposed to social Trinitarian relationship ‘outside of God’ (Economic Trinity). There is only a relational God of love who is en-selfed yet freely communal and en-othered yet freely distinct. This Trinitarian way of life would mean for Wesley that his understanding of revival is not so much about a revival of the church, but rather the revival of relationality through love.

Eco-relationality provides the lens to shift the focus from a theology that focuses on the ‘existence of God’ to a theology that embraces an ‘existence of multiple relationships in God’. Rather than focussing on studies of ecology and how the nature of God fits into the ecological sphere, as is often done by process and eco-theologians alike, we need to focus on the primacy of relationality of God through Christ in the Spirit. From an eco-relational perspective, all of us are meant to exist in harmonious relationships in an ‘eco-relational household’ where life and resources are meant to be shared and flow from one to the other in a Trinitarian way. In such a household, despite being different in race, gender, identity, and

expression, while humans have different designs from that of the trees, land, and ocean, we are all diversely connected through an ‘ecological reference’.

Therefore, nothing exists outside of such reference. Human beings are believed to be ‘ecologically formed’. I carry within me the terrestrial, oceanic, and ancestral dynamics that form who I am. The environment is meant to be ‘ecologically structured’. Communities and societies should be ‘ecologically ordered’. Our languages are meant to be ‘ecologically nuanced’. Even God ecologically modifies Godself through the work of the Spirit in order to be part of eco-relationality. This ‘ecological reference’ informs us that eco-relationality is like a strand that connects all of us human beings as well as our activities to the soil, ocean, water, trees, sky, and God. We are undivided in separate distinct bodies. Because of this reality it means therefore that when one is affected, all are affected! When one suffers, all suffer! This is the Trinitarian structure of life that according to Gregory of Nazianzus, we cannot understand the Trinity unless we understand mutuality. When we speak of one, we speak of the whole (the Trinity) because one is mutually included in the whole.³³

The primacy of relationality found its way into Wesley’s thinking that he was more interested in how God ‘relates’ rather than how God exists. One would argue that this theological emphasis of Wesley was drawn from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Since Albert Outler in the mid-1960s suggested a connection between Wesley’s theology and the Cappadocian fathers, many debates have surfaced that either confirm or deny such a claim.³⁴ Whatever the outcome, it is hard to deny the influence of the Patristic fathers on Wesley’s relational terms of salvation. This is obvious in how Wesley approached the doctrine of the Trinity, despite

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 40.41, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol 7, 2nd series, edited by Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1978), 7:375

³⁴ Albert C. Outler (ed), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9-10. See especially footnote on page 9. For the debates, see for example Ted A. Campbell, “Wesley’s Use of the Church Fathers”, *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (1995): 57-70.

the fact that he was careful of using the word ‘Trinity’ as it was not found in the bible.³⁵ In his sermon *On the Trinity*, Wesley argued that God’s revelation is “at the very heart of Christianity” and that “the knowledge of the Three-In-One God”, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, “is interwoven with all true Christian faith”.³⁶ This means that for Wesley, knowledge of God does not start with what Catherine Mowry LaCugna calls a rational piercing into the “inner life of God” about which we know nothing. Rather it is woven together with how God ‘relates to us’ through Christ in the Spirit in the economy of salvation.³⁷

We find this in this divine relationality in the fact that God has to move out of Godself through Christ, not so much to relate as God is already relational, but rather to affirm to us the way God works. That is, God’s en-otherness (moving towards us) does not in any way compromise his divine identity (en-selfness). Rather it is the very thing that affirms it. This divine paradox is key to understanding the ‘deep involvement’ of God. It is also key to understanding how we, made in the light of the relationality of God, can only ‘be us’ when we include those who are ‘not us’. In other words, it is relationality that may lead us to discover more about the mystery of the divine, despite that we do so brokenly, as Wesley would have put it. And in this discovery we may find that a God-driven relationship is critical to a grace-driven salvation.

This relational theological basis of Wesley’s theology allowed him to shift from the ‘one truth ideology’ that hampered the mission of the Church at the time reinforced by a ‘*must be hermeneutics*’. The *must be hermeneutics* is when orthodoxy takes control of the life of the Church by solidifying its institutional identity at the expense of multiple relationships,

³⁵ John Wesley, “On the Trinity”, in *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, vol 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976—), 377-378.

³⁶ Wesley, “On the Trinity”, 384-385.

³⁷ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), 1f.

especially with those in poverty-stricken spaces. Wesley, if you like, adopted a ‘*let be hermeneutics*’ that focuses on an identity of the church grounded theologically on orthodoxy yet lets itself be fashioned and shaped by the free grace of God in the Spirit.³⁸

This is why Wesley, in my view, did not draw up a definite number of fundamental doctrines, as for him, relationship is fundamental. He believes that everything, including religion, should come from a relationship that begins with God and is communicated by the Spirit to all. “For neither does religion consist in orthodoxy or right opinions” and Wesley continues that a person “may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the creeds...and yet ‘tis possible he may have no religion at all”.³⁹ Wesley is not discarding orthodoxy, yet he thinks that without the love of ‘deep involvement’, orthodoxy finds no meaning. At the heart of orthodoxy is the primacy of divine involvement. Hence the comprehend-ability of orthodoxy is found in its perform-ability.

Perhaps Wesley saw into the future that when orthodoxy is detached from performance, it can easily become a warrant to justify power structures. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity in the Pacific was and is still used to justify the colonisation of spaces and people in the name of God. When God is understood as omnipotent and omniscient this is normally translated to mean a deity who exists in ‘deep isolation’, who only approves of relations that prop-up the power structures of the status quo. In this light, sin therefore is not just personal. It is also systemic and socially structured, and normally when we benefit from a structured system, we

³⁸ For the ‘must be hermeneutics’ and the ‘let be hermeneutics’, see Upolu Luma Vaai, “Motu male Taula: Towards an Island ‘Let Be’ Hermeneutics”, *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 53 (2015):25-40.

³⁹ John Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom”, Sermons I, 7, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 220f.

go to great lengths to protect it, despite its destructive impact on the many, including the natural environment.

Concluding Remarks

A shift from eco-theology to eco-relational theology is an ecological revolution grounded on the primacy of the relationality of God, something that Wesley had always emphasized. For Wesley, it is in this relational grounding that allowed him to be theologically innovative and practically relational. It allowed him to go beyond the dominant narrative of his time to challenge not only the existing centre of power but also the existing theological basis that justified such power, which is God. It also allowed him to believe that God's free grace is 'in all and for all', which led him to a life of 'deep connection' and 'deep involvement'. To Wesley, "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it".⁴⁰ What would this mean to a church that calls itself the Body of Christ within a vulnerable and exposed region such as Oceania?

The primacy of relationality would assist in decolonizing of our mindsets that the fracturing and destruction of multiple relations, including the natural environment, is against God's plan of salvation. Sustainability of life is possible not only through the embracing and strengthening of multiple relations, but also including the relationship with the natural environment. It is also about re-establishing and reconnecting with the whole of creation. It will also help inform Oceanic Methodism about the importance of engaging in social and environmental justice movements and advocacies.

⁴⁰ John Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fourth", cited by Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion*, vii.

Most importantly, the Spirit for Wesley enables the relationality of God in our lives. It also makes possible the revolutionary spirit of transformation and newness. With the absence of the Spirit, relationality would be stagnant and could be easily converted to being a tool to support the hierarchy and the abuse of power. It could also be a way to solidify false relationalities that are already firmly established within our own institutions and ministerial formation. To emphasize eco-relationality is to emphasize the revolutionary role of the Spirit from beginning to end. The Spirit is synonymous both to revolution and newness, making possible the free flow of the grace of God who continually draws us to celebrate and embrace the diverse rhythms and movements of life within the eco-relational family. According to Leonardo Boff, “To think of the Spirit is to think of movement, action, process, appearance, story, and the irruption of something new and surprising. It means thinking about what we are constantly becoming”.⁴¹ In this light, an ecological revolution through an eco-relational theology is something that will not only surprise our theologies of God and notions of orthodoxy. It will also surely upset the possessive and life-taking mentality we develop in our daily engagement with Caesar, the god of the empire.

⁴¹ Leonardo Boff, *Come Holy Spirit: Inner Fire, Giver of Life and Comforter of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), viii.