Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:
The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s
Manfred Ernst, Lydia Johnson (Editors)
2017
550 pages

Chapter 10: Casimira, Aisake, and Ernst, Manfred: Ecumenism in the Pacific Islands – A Stocktaking at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Part 1: The socio-economic, political and moral context
The first out of two parts of the chapter begins by providing an overview about the socio-economic, political and moral context of the pacific Islands.

Oceania in different dominating contexts
Oceania is, firstly, described as a "contested geopolitical space".
The chapter points out how different contesting powers are increasingly trying to wield influence on the Pacific in order to realize the goals of their own political and economic interests. At the same time, pacific countries, collaborating in regional institutions, have evaluated their own responses and approaches to internal and external challenges.
Based on a perceived failure of the 2004 Pacific Plan for pacific regionalism, the pacific countries provided two new approaches, the one currently more dominating in the actual policies of pacific island countries sending a strong signal of independency and self-determination, clearly connected with an orientation towards partnerships with China at the expense of western ideas of development.

However, the Pacific is not only geo-politically contested, but also exposed to growing insecurity. The chapter assesses that the region has experienced several forms of political and ethnical violence since the 1980s. Apart from struggles going along with journeys of independency, the chapter also names several other "key factors" that are further underlying reasons for this "context of insecurity". These key factors will be summed up in the following.

The chapter points out that the global rise of a new security policy - a policy that emphasizes perceived dangers by "weak states" that could be possibly tackled by (military) intervention - can also be applied on regional level.

However, the help provided by the "threatened" countries does not actually mitigate the underlying reasons for the national insecurity in the respective countries, e.g. poverty or other forms of inequality, but instead only serves the national interest of these powerful countries and thus even deteriorates existing problems in pacific island countries.

The chapter further states that pacific island societies are exposed to severe impacts through neo-liberalism. It is argued that the philosophical fundamentals of neo-liberalism, particularly the assumption that all aspects of human beings and the environment can and should be subordinated to their respective economic value, are currently not only clashing with, but increasingly replacing indigenous views and consequently eradicating them. The dominance of this neo-liberal world view has been made possible through the implementation of a so called – forced on by western powers– "structural adjustment policy" which was on first sight a development approach entailing privatization and austerity, but turned out to also render people's every day social life by the dominance of the described principles.

The chapter furthermore argues that this neo-liberal world view, concretely visible in the policy of privatization and austerity, leads to a development strategy based on overall dominance of economic growth. This strategy has not only failed to hold its promise of progress for everyone, but has also led to increasing environmental (through the exploitation of resources for export on world markets) and cultural (through the described loss of indigenous views) depletion. Consequently, pacific island countries now see themselves confronted with severe problems, like poverty and health concerns, which urgently need to be addressed.

Another key factor leading to a pacific context of insecurity is the question of governance and development. The chapter recognizes a hybridization of traditional forms of governance with western-style democracies in, to different extend, all pacific island countries. This tension has contributed to social change, sometimes even ethnical conflicts.

Regarding different suggestions that aim on a solution, the chapter holds a very critical opinion towards those approaches that call for solutions through better "governance". It is argued that these calls mainly promote a picture of passive governments which should only provide spaces for foreign investors to deploy their own economic interests. However, this approach is criticised as forcing a western way on pacific countries that is post-colonial in its assumption that the western concept of governance and development is superior and thus fails to consider different cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, as argued previously, this development strategy of privatization and austerity has failed to address poverty.

The pacific is also becoming more insecure due to several forms of human right abuses. The chapter points out how pacific islanders are exposed to political and civil rights abuses, how

some countries still struggle for decolonization respectively self-determination, and particularly emphasizes the alarming extend to which "systemic" gender inequity and thus violence reaches in the pacific. It also stresses the (indispensable) role of United Nations in the process of tackling these issues.

However, the chapter also points out how the neo-liberal capitalistic understanding of human rights undermines their implementation. It is argued that neo-liberal ideology emphasizes a right of every human being on individual choice to an extend that marginalizes things like "collective commitment, obligation and restraint", thus serving people's wants but not responding to their need for meaning and purpose in life. This in turn undermines several essences of pacific culture, not only because it emphasizes individual preferences over "collective obligations", but also because it denies the role of culture as primary influence on people's identity. It is thus finally argued for the churches to promote human rights to be "covenantal rather than transactional" in order to unglue pacific understandings of human rights from neo-liberal mentality.

The last key factor entailing a context of insecurity which is reflected on is the issue of climate change and environmental depletion. The chapter states that, despite of their urgency, climate change related problems are not opposed sufficiently in the Pacific. It furthermore states that an "attitude of carelessness" can also lead to internal problems, most importantly tremendous amount of wastes which are not disposed sustainably. The consequences of climate change encompass loss of biodiversity, degradation of basic resources, e.g. soils and marine resources, as well as forced resettlement.

The challenge for the churches and the theological vision as base for the analysis
The chapter considers it to be "imperative" for the pacific as a whole as well as for the churches in their role as crucial players in civil society to act upon these challenges, not merely by adapting to the current situation with its vast influence from competing foreign powers, but by developing a "counter-narrative" that reveals alternative trajectories that consider and respect "national and regional contexts".

In sight of the authors, this task of telling a new narrative becomes even more urgent to the churches since the increasing role of states as passive governors leaves them alone with the task to protect civil societies' common goods. It is further argued that this becomes even more evident when considering the influence of neo-liberalism on politics, which is, through its nature of attaching economic prices without considering values or ethics, unavoidably not moral.

This trend is accompanied by various other trends which all have in common that they bring about rapid change. One of these changes is growing mobility. This marks a contrast to their original culture of constancy and crutch which in turn leave them with an uncertainty about the very essence of their identity. This is considered to be the primary reason for the uprising of both political and religious extremism.

The chapter thus argues that developing the already postulated new, big narrative will help pacific societies find new constants in their lives to cherish and thus adapt to these changes.

The last section of the first part deals with the theological vision that underlies the whole book's analysis. This vision is based on an interpretation of the bible that seeks to oppose an imperial narrative claiming for truth to be universal and thus the interaction of world views leading to extinction of differences. Instead, it is argued that "we are at once particular *and* universal", namely universal in our nature as human beings which entails universal values like "human dignity" and "sanctity of life", but at the same time particular in our belonging to different identities. These conclusions are considered to be valid just as much for the churches, leading to a "call to the churches to explore together what it means to be a 'different' community that is united, in one Body, in its mission […] to bring peace, justice and integrity of creation to our sea of islands".

Part 2: Challenges for ecumenism – insights from the research

The second part of the final chapter deals with "challenges for ecumenism – insights from the research". The chapter assesses that in the Pacific, there is a clearly visible rise of new religious groups at the expense of the historic mainline churches. In this context, part two will evaluate the field research being conducted for the nine country reports, after having given an overview of the global development of Christianity.

Regarding the global development of Christianity, the chapter constitutes a continuous growth of Christianity, in regards to both its percentage numbers and its plurality of denominations, ever since its emerging. Disruption of this growth was caused only by a few, historically always singular events.

However, this trend was partly reversed in the last century. Comparing the development of Christianity in different regions of the world, a slight overall decrease and a remarkable decrease in regions of the Global North has to be recognized. This is accompanied by another trend within Christianity, the "Pentecostal explosion" that also leads to a suffering of the historic mainline churches. In regards to the pacific, the chapter assesses that the rise of the Pentecostal churches (and the so called Charismatic Churches) has triggered a fierce competition between churches which works diametrical against the ecumenical movement with its vision of mutual cooperation.

Analysis of interviews and talanoa sessions

Regarding understanding of ecumenism, the authors of the chapter discern sharp difference in interviewees' perception depending on their involvement in ecumenism, level of education, and position in the church. Two main groups can be evaluated: Whereas the "laity" construes ecumenism mainly as a way for churches to work together on issues directly affecting people's reality of life, the "educated elite" tends to refer to "Jesus' prayer for unity in the Gospel of John 17:12" which entails a "biblical mandate for the churches".

The current state of ecumenism is described as in many ways quite ambiguous. Despite of existing national councils of churches in 8/9 nations included in the field research, their

impact and effectiveness is highly disputed. It is stated that cooperation within these highly important institutions is limited to joint experience of ideologically already shared events but does not extend to joint projects or even dialogue. This lack of dialogue is particularly emphasized in regards to the *Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) document, which is considered to possibly provide basic agreement on the very issues needed for successful ecumenical cooperation. Despite of remarkable ecumenical cooperation at grassroots level in some pacific islands nations, the chapter states that trend of growing diversification represents a significant impediment to collaboration between churches.

Issues and challenges for ecumenism in the pacific
Four different categories of issues and challenges are distinguished: Social problems, globalisation and rapid social change, leadership in churches and society, and financial difficulties.
Regarding the first of these categories, most frequently mentioned social problems include "domestic violence […], teenage pregnancy, substance abuse […], unemployment, poverty and youth suicide." Especially the first of these challenges and within this, particularly the form of domestic violence against women and children, is given a high priority by the chapter. It is also indicated that despite of a high recognition of domestic violence and teenage pregnancy as problems by interview partners, the actually affected people feel like their challenges are not recognized and acknowledged as such by their social environment, e.g. the respective societies. Rather, it appears that these topics are either not being discussed or even socially stigmatised.

Challenges related to the impact of globalisation mainly comprise "rapid social change on economies, societies, cultures and religious affiliations." There are several particular challenges which all contribute to the already mentioned context of insecurity.
The current form of development, which is based on the excessive extraction of natural resources by multinational companies, provide not only the destruction of the environment, but also wide ranging social consequences that are considered to outweigh the often marginal financial benefits by far. Only a few among many examples are land disputes, deteriorated air quality, and insufficient working conditions.

Another issue related to impacts of globalisation is climate change.
The impacts of climate change include severe destruction of environmental foundation which in turn exacerbates people's freedom and prospects to lead a healthy, secure and dignified life. Despite of undisputed high relevance for the whole region, especially low-lying regions and thus naturally the atolls of Micronesia in particular are affected by these impacts. In regards to some regions, even forced resettlement and (thus) an immense loss of "identity and livelihood" are not really discussed in terms of *if* anymore, but in terms of *when*. The chapter assesses a lack of committed approaches to these challenges.

The third globalisation related issue taken up by the chapter is changes in religious affiliation. Interview partners frequently refer to "growing influence of new religious

groups". This entails a diversification not only of the religious landscape as a whole, but also within communities. However, this has direct impacts on how even families can perceive their relationships among each other, since the different religious identities separate different family members not only ideologically, but even cause direct splits in a family's interactions and thus threaten social cohesion within entire villages.

Some interview partners explain the success of these new religious groups with their very direct approach to people that includes getting engaged in dialogue with them at their very own houses and supporting them with their social needs in a way that is described as "bribing" by one interview partner from Tonga. However, it is also noted that the mainline churches still struggle to find an appropriate answer to this challenge and are not seldom divided between each other themselves.

Finally, the chapter states that there is a continuous, deeply-anchored and far-reaching problem with leadership that applies to all countries being reported about in the book. These problems include ineffectiveness in terms of a reluctance to make decisions or elaborate specific strategies, which would, however, be vital for a successful approach on the previously mentioned challenges.
The issue is not limited to national churches, but includes regional bodies, PCC in particular, just as well as entities on lower levels.
Financial problems, another highly important topic that has not been solved for around 30 years now, are also not considered to be merely *connected* to leadership, but to *derive* from consistent failures of leaders to make decisions concerning finances. This has led to continuous under financing of all three regional bodies. The chapter states that a revitalisation of ecumenism can not succeed unless there is a shift in the way the churches are being led.

Successes and failures of ecumenical cooperation
This summary will begin by listing the successes of ecumenical cooperation first.
On regional level, institution of the three organisations PCC, PTC and SPATS as well as the services provided by them are widely highlighted.
Especially the unique way of coming into dialogue via PCC and also SPATS, the quality of education provided by PTC and the impact on social concerns through programs and successful campaigns implemented by GPP/IRSA and PCC are acknowledged by interview partners.
On national level, the chapter lists several forms of ecumenical cooperation. Among these, one form that seems to apply to most pacific islands countries is the shared celebration of national events, which to the author of this summary seems to indicate that the common national identity facilitates the establishment of common identities in faith.
There is furthermore very committed ecumenical cooperation in some villages. Especially very remote islands seem to particularly stand out here and are considered to be possible role models for ecumenical cooperation on further reaching levels.

However, the chapter also names several failures of ecumenical cooperation.

The authors of the chapter perceive a general discontent among many interviewees regarding the current state of ecumenism. It is indicated that this derives mainly from persisting mistrust between the mainline churches, lack of dialogue (particularly on the well-known BEM document) and ineffective National Councils of Churches (NCCs) that is partly caused by another substantial factor, the lack of visionary leadership. Leadership is considered to have such vital influence on the ecumenical movement due to the strong hierarchies within churches that require leaders to initiate programs and joint actions. Further reasons for the ineffectiveness of the NCCs are "insufficient funds, lack of commitment by member churches, mismanagement", and no genuine willingness to step out of one's comfort zone in order to improve ecumenical relations.

The chapter also points out that these reasons are naturally interconnected. One example for this interconnectedness is that the lack of commitment has direct effects on the financial situation of NCCs and regional bodies since these organisations depend on membership fees as means of funding, which, however, are not always paid by member churches. Nevertheless, this lack of commitment is not single-sided, but works reciprocally with a significant number of complaints about a perceived decrease in PCC's initiated activities and insufficient respectively decreased communication and information about them.

The chapter also emphasizes the role of overseas partners as donors. In this framework, it is stated that the heavy dependency on overseas funds does not only lead to a dependency in terms of interests from overseas that are potentially over-emphasized in comparison to pacific interests and views, but has also triggered pacific churches to become passive and reluctant to act on their own behalf. It is regarded as imperative to "move beyond" this mindset of dependency.

Despite of these external influences, the chapter also very critically assesses the internal reasons for organisational, e.g. practical, deficits, for example in terms of accountability and transparency. The chapter simultaneously mentions the dominant reluctance among many pacific islanders to submit their own culture to such a very act of self-critic.

Particularly a strong tendency to "avoid conflict at all costs" and "a culture of loyalty and obedience", in which actions of leaders are hardly questioned, is considered to lead to a detrimental persistence of decisions or concrete programs/staff workers and leaders which/who are not contributing positively to the work of their churches but are not addressed as such due to cultural reasons.

The chapter is furthermore referring to the recently mostly in countries of Melanesia emerging partnerships with governments. Such partnerships have shown to potentially provide several truly effective programs aiming to tackle social issues, but are also criticised to endanger the churches "prophetic voice. This also poses the "very important" question whether it should be ecumenical cooperation or development projects that provide the framework for the reverse.

Prospects for ecumenism

The chapter perceives an ambiguous atmosphere among interview partners that is composed of a pessimistic view about current ecumenical cooperation on one side, and an optimistic view on ecumenism's future on the other side.

The chapter emphasizes that when speaking about prospects and therefore the future of ecumenism, it is impossible to ignore the social-economic issues, and particularly the economic system, that are enforcing a rapid "paradigm shift" in pacific islands societies today. These challenges are described in previous parts of this summary and include the following issues: Questions of compatibility between traditional and new forms of society, rise of neo-liberalism as economic and social model, ethnic and political conflicts, problems facing youth, gender-based violence, and all forms of environmental destruction, depletion and erosion encompassed by pollution, resource extraction and climate change.

The interconnectedness of all of these issues should never be forgotten.

In order to face these challenges, the chapter emphasizes the huge potential of the church to move beyond their spiritual mission and also include "material and social" development. This potential is seen to be most visible in areas of connectedness and embedment to local contexts, "significant and valuable infrastructure", and proven capacity and therefore a distinct history in the promotion of social progress. This should, however, not hide the fact that pacific church leaders may be well prepared in mere theological aspects, but are also more and more required to acquire skills in other areas such as, among many, social analysis, management, or counselling, that will allow them to be sufficiently prepared for the vast and diverse challenges they will undoubtedly encounter during their ministry.

The chapter arrives at several main conclusions that derive from the analysis undertaken in the previous parts. Regarding the current state of ecumenism, an overall "lack of substance, commitment, direction and spiritual vision" is recognized. The most important conclusion, however, emerges from the challenges concerning social issues. Despite of a perceived very high importance for the churches to fulfil their role as prophetic voice in the fight for sustainable solutions, the chapter finds them ill equipped to do so. This is seen to be caused by a theology that has not changed according to new and rapid challenges, but in reverse is considered to still cherish outdated ideas and models. Therefore it is imperative for the churches to develop a theological analysis that considers and responds to social realities. The churches are invited to collectively create an accentuated Christian vision that meets the potential of the churches role as players in civil society.

The chapter proposes the following recommendations, directed to all decision-makers on all levels with influence on ecumenism. It should be noted that these recommendations can not make up for intense study of the recommendations in the individual country reports.

The chapter recommends the pacific churches to create awareness for the influence of historical and socio-economic trends on both pacific societies and the churches themselves, followed by a review of their self-understanding with regards to their political efficacy.

It is further recommended to equip leaders with skills in key areas beyond theology as well

as capacities to overcome currently normal corruption, to always open up for ecumenical cooperation if common interests exist and to always put the vulnerable, voiceless and marginalised, with special consideration for women and youths, at the centre of their agendas.

This summary can not give readers the same depth and detail provided by the original chapter, but has aimed to reflect the authors' views in the best way possible.

Vincent Gewert, Volunteer at the Institute for Mission and Research, PTC