

## Solastalgia and Hope: Theological and Postcolonial Perspectives from Europe and the Pacific responding to the ecological crisis in (religious) education

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**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag macht auf die gesellschaftlichen wie globalen Folgen, aber auch auf die tiefgreifenden emotionalen Auswirkungen der ökologischen Krisen aus theologischer Perspektive aufmerksam. Das Phänomen der Solastalgie, aber auch der Verlust ganzheitlichen Denkens zeigt sich als emotionale oder existenzielle Not, die durch die Umweltveränderungen hervorgerufen wird und die den Verlust von Heimat, Identität und Kultur hervorruft. Um eine Antwort auf diese drängenden theologischen wie religionspädagogischen Herausforderungen zu geben, wird in diesem Artikel ein doppelter Versuch unternommen: Zum einen werden die Verstrickungen der christlichen Missionsgesellschaften in die kolonialen Herrschaftsstrukturen Europas dekonstruiert, die die Ausbeutung der natürlichen Ressourcen mit legitimierten. Dazu gehört auch die Erkenntnis, dass im Namen des Christentums die Unterdrückung indigener Wissens- und Erkenntnisformen, die einen Schatz an Sorge um die Natur und Formen nachhaltigen Lebens beinhalten, legitimiert wurde. Andererseits eröffnet die Auseinandersetzung mit diesen historischen Entwicklungslinien aber auch die Chance, indigene Hoffnungsnarrative wieder in religionspädagogische Prozesse einzubringen und ihre alternativen Weltbezüge konstruktiv zu machen, die sich aus einem Dialog mit indigener Erkenntnistheorie und Spiritualität speisen. Ziel des Beitrags ist es, herauszufinden, welche neuen Einsichten sich aus diesem Dialog der Kontexte zwischen Pazifik und Europa ergeben und welche neuen Horizonte sie für den Religionsunterricht bieten können.

**Schlagwörter:** Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung, Solastalgie, Kolonialismus und Mission, indigene Epistemologie und Spiritualität, Narrative der Hoffnung

**Abstract:** This paper draws attention to the social as well as global consequences, but also to the profound emotional impact of the ecological crises from a theological perspective. The phenomenon of solastalgia, as well as the loss of holistic thinking, manifests itself as emotional or existential distress caused by environmental changes, resulting in the loss of home, identity, and culture. In order to provide a response to these urgent theological as well as religious education challenges, this article makes a twofold attempt: On the one hand, it deconstructs the entanglements of Christian missionary societies in European colonial structures of domination that helped legitimize the exploitation of natural resources. This includes the understanding that in the name of Christianity, the suppression of indigenous forms of knowledge and cognition, which contain a treasure of concern for nature and forms of sustainable living, was legitimized. On the other hand, the engagement with these historical lines of development, however, opens up the opportunity to re-engage indigenous narratives of hope in religious education processes and to make their alternative world relations constructive, which is fed by a dialogue with indigenous epistemology and spirituality. The aim of this paper is to find out what new insights emerge from this dialogue of contexts between the Pacific and Europe and what new horizons they can offer for religious education.

**Keywords:** Education for sustainable development, solastalgia, colonialism and mission, indigenous epistemology and spirituality, narratives of hope

## **I. Introduction: When the Earth Speaks to Us – Symbolic Narratives in Education**

There is this already somewhat older story by the German children's and youth author Gudrun Pausewang, which has an almost prophetic character. After the reactor catastrophe in Chernobyl in 1986, the educator Pausewang wrote the story of 'the children in the earth' – a mythological-symbolic tale that tells of how Mother Earth finds the hustle and bustle of mankind too much and denounces the exploitation and destruction of the foundations of life. But the adults do not want to listen and mock the earth as a servant of their needs. And so the earth addresses the children, who feel completely with her, but they are also not heard by their parents. Then the earth decides together with the children to set a sign and to bring the grown-ups to reason. They go underground, into the safety of the earth and the children have good dreams there. Above on earth, however, there was excitement and despair. The parents look for their children everywhere and finally stop working entirely because they no longer see any sense in their work. In this way, the earth can begin to recover little by little, and it is waking up the children so that they can return to their parents. The children and the adults now consult together on how they can set about making amends for what they have done to the earth. They receive important advice from the sun, wind and water and they realize that it is not easy, it takes a lot of energy, strength, rethinking and good will. But the grief and the fear of the destruction of the earth is so immense that they stick to the survival-important task of living in good relationship with the earth and the animate nature (Pausewang & Fuchshuber, 1988).

This deeply moving symbolic story, which tells of man's disturbed relationship with nature, has lost nothing of its topicality. In a symbolic way, it triggers intense consternation about the fact that the reckless lifestyles of the Western world have detached man from the context of nature and thus opened up the possibility of destroying the ecosystem. The story is able to make the destructive consequences of a merely rational and economic relationship with the living world, expressed in climate crises, migration, and pandemics, emotionally and existentially comprehensible and to find ways to renew the relationship with Mother Nature.

It is such symbolic and mythological narratives that exist in many religious traditions of indigenous cultures and that help to create epistemologies through images, analogies, metaphors, and multi-layered symbols. In these narratives, human beings and nature are interwoven in a net of life that connects them and places them in a complementary relationship of responsibility. Rediscovering these often-forgotten approaches to the world provides the opportunity for (religious) educational processes to realize the integrity of creation, sustainable development, climate justice normatively, but also spiritually in a completely new way.

On the one hand, these narrations make it possible to open up a deeper dimension of reality that is not related to an abstract cognitive capacity (Cassirer, 1923; Tillich, 1964), but, in the sense of a second nativity, to comprehend natural connections that are obviously not recognized by rationality and science (Ricoeur, 1960a; 1960b). Children and youth who engage with such symbolic stories are given the chance to tell of their grief and powerlessness over the loss and irretrievable destruction of nature, but also of restoring unity in life and achieving true sustainability. On the other hand, students can recognize anew what meanings these religious symbolic narratives can have for shaping a 'meaningful public sphere' and human agency (Arendt, 1958) in the Anthropocene. On this realization "more may depend than ever before, namely, the continued existence of humanity on earth" (Arendt, 1959).

Given this background, the following contribution addresses the desideratum of religious education research on education for sustainable development. From a hermeneutic and heuristic point of view, the research question is posed as to which theological, postcolonial, and indigenous perspectives from Europe and the Pacific lead to new epistemologies and contexts of knowledge in order to respond to the ecological crisis. This is the starting point to find out which new insights result from this dialogue of

contexts and which new horizons they can provide for religious education. In a first step, the connection between colonialism, globalization, and the destruction of the ecosystem, which led to the extinction of indigenous knowledge, is explored (2). Subsequent to this, the term *solastalgia* is introduced, referring to the enormous emotional consequences and pain about the destruction of nature and the exploitation of natural resources (3). The significance of hope and the practice of hope are then opened up (4) to discuss how indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities can help to shape a new story of interdependent connectedness and live this new story through practices of embodied hope (5). Finally, an anticipation of what this process of insight can contribute for religious education for a renewed being-in-the-world is given (6).

## **2. Colonialism, Globalization, and the Displacement of Wild Thinking**

The potential to restore the unity of life and achieve true sustainability must be a scientific, ethical, cultural, theological, and decisively an educational response. That this is more necessary than ever, but not a matter of course, is summed up by the Australian philosopher Clive Hamilton: “Today the greatest tragedy is the absence of a sense of the tragedy” (Hamilton, 2017). The challenge of transforming these human but also institutional mindsets and generating the insight that the globalized high-growth society cannot be continued in this way is also confronting the education system and, with it, religious education. If religious education wants to convey its social relevance and initiate change processes in the ecological crisis from the sources of religions, it requires strenuous processes of conversion and redirection. From a Christian perspective, this implies above all a critical deconstruction of historical developments of Christianity and practicing theological self-criticism until a new theology leads to practical consequences, in particular in educational processes.

This includes first taking a scrutinizing look at the colonial and missionary societal entanglements of the Christian Western world (Aly, 2021; Döbler, 2021), which played a crucial role in making the current destruction of the ecosystem possible at all. Uncovering the traces of colonial structures of dominance and bringing to light marginalized perspectives in today's societies, but also making visible structures of neocolonial globalization that are co-responsible for the exploitation of natural resources, seems more than ever also an urgent theological task (Gruber, 2018). Postcolonial theologies call to mind that the Bible is the central reference point of the Christian and “civilizing” mission that accompanied and first legitimized colonial hegemony. As the Anglican Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Mpilo Tutu concisely puts it: “When the first missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They asked us to pray. And we closed our eyes. When we opened them again, the situation was just the opposite: we had the Bible, and they had the land.” Examining and uncovering this connection between knowledge and power in the textual production of the West, therefore, emerges as a necessary approach to theological reflection (Sugirtharajah, 2013, p. 125). Even if no differentiated historical insight into the entanglement of mission and colonization can be given here (Pittl, 2018; Ratschiller & Wetjen, 2018; Habermas & Hölzl, 2014), it is nevertheless evident in a historical retrospective that in the course of civilizing colonization and Christianization the spiritual knowledge and world approaches of indigenous peoples were judged as primitive, pagan, and anti-Christian. In many cases, the Christian mission provided the theoretical superstructure for this by conveying that the religious as well as societal superiority of whites was the God-ordained order and that indigenous cultures were not only inferior but also sinful and devilish. This hermeneutic practice laid the foundation for suppressing indigenous knowledge of animate nature, enslaving their mediators, understanding them as a lower race, and speaking of white civilized superiority (WCC, 2012). European colonialism and Christian missions, which have proceeded against indigenous worldviews since the Middle Ages, can be understood as a crusade against indigenous epistemology through Christian theology of redemption, which removed humans from the context of nature (Kirchhoff, 1999). Until the 20th century, supported by ethnology and the scientific traditions of rational reason, the binary structures of the Eurocentric worldview were

maintained: here the civilized rational Christian world, there the archaic primitive pagan world, here the culture, there the savage people who had to be developed. It is these interpretations of the world that continue to form the foundations for racism, exclusion and, above all, the exploitation of natural resources.

It is to the credit of the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was one of the first in the 20th century to address the displacement of indigenous thinking forms, thus initiating a phase of deconstruction of colonial structures of power and thought. With his re-reading of indigenous narratives and forms of thought, he provides an impressive insight into the holistic, often symbolic, worldview of indigenous cultures, which he understands as an equal approach to reality alongside the scientific findings of modernity. In his ethnological studies in Brazil, Canada, and Japan, he comes to similar conclusions as Cassirer, Warburg, and Wittgenstein before him: what he calls 'wild thinking' consists of important forms of thought that are not inferior to those of science and that do not need to be disciplined under the standards of rationality. Wild thinking "forms a precisely articulated system and is in this respect independent of the other system that science will later establish." For Lévi-Strauss, these two forms of thinking do not form an opposition, but rather show themselves as two ways of knowing from a different point of view (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p. 25f.). From an ethnopsychological point of view, indigenous knowledge is linked to timeless mythological concepts: the material world is alive, a soul substance is seen in it, which weaves through everything, and which is experienced as a kind of cosmic religiosity. Humans are woven into this network of life and mandated with responsibility (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p. 52f). This thinking incorporates an approach to the world and a sense of meaning that have enabled indigenous cultures to live sustainably for thousands of years. Their knowledge and practice are more necessary today than ever because their way of life and their millennia of care and responsibility for nature can be an important key to the survival of humanity. Bringing their knowledge and wisdom into dialogue with Christian theology can become a healing re-reading of societal as well as the theological power traditions that also deconstructs neo-colonial efforts in the form of 'green colonialism', which implements its renewable energy needs and other conservation activities on the territory and at the expense of indigenous groups (cf. green colonialism).

### **3. Solastalgia and the loss of wholeness**

The preceding reflections not only indicate the societal and global consequences, but also draw attention to profound emotional consequences of the ecological crises. It is the existential sense of loss that people all over the world express as emotional pain about the destruction of nature and the exploitation of natural resources. This pain is exemplified by the school strike for the climate, which started as a global social movement from pupils and students and led to the founding of Fridays for Future. The initiator Greta Thunberg showed this emotional pain at the UN Climate Summit on 23.9.2019: "People suffer, people die, whole ecosystems collapse. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and the fairy tales of economic growth that will last forever. [...] How dare you steal my dreams and my childhood with your empty words?"

This sorrow and emotionality are summed up by Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht as early as 2003 in the term *solastalgia*, which he coined anew in light of the emotional reactions of people experiencing intensive coal mining in Australia's Hunter Valley in the early 2000s. As the mines expanded, Albrecht registered a basic tenor in the emotional reactions of the valley's inhabitants: they knew that the mines were the cause of their suffering, but they found it difficult to put the feelings into words. The physical disturbance of the valley corroded the sense of home that people had felt. And while the mines dyed more and more green fields gray, Albrecht gave the sense of loss a name: "Solastalgia" denotes the pain of losing a comforting sense of home safety. The neologism is composed of the Latin *solacium* ("consolation") and the ancient Greek *algos* ("pain"). With this neologism, Albrecht de-

scribes a form of physical or existential stress, which is caused by environmental changes and especially environmental devastation. “Solastalgia is the lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home” (Albrecht, 2006). This existential distress is experienced in different ways across the globe and is already precipitating the loss of home, identity and culture through climate induced displacement forcing movements of people in search of new homes: Pacific islands that are sinking, rainforests that are being clear-cut for soybean farming and cattle ranching, droughts that massively affect agriculture, the retreat of permafrost in the Arctic that is displacing indigenous people and encouraging new economic exploitation on their land, etc. “Let’s get it out of the world. Let’s eliminate the circumstances, the forces that cause solastalgia.” Albrecht posits that the antidote to solastalgia is “in a future that has to be designed and created” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 45). In this way, the Australian environmental philosopher provides the necessary impetus to develop counter-designs that can have a decisive impact in (religious) educational processes. What role or insights might hope offer in such processes in light of the ecological crisis?

#### 4. Embodying Hope in Religious Educational Practices

In this time of extraordinary ecological crisis alongside of which there is increasing awareness of solastalgia or eco-anxiety, is as Timothy Robinson observed in a recent article, “manifesting in a crisis of hope” (Robinson, 2020, p. 1). The problem with hope is, as Ruth Guyatt states, its “ambivalent duality” (Guyatt, 2020). Hope is usually associated with and understood to be passive optimism, or blind faith which manifests in avoidance, denial, complacency, and inaction (Anderson, 2006; Guyatt, 2020; Head, 2016; Robinson, 2020) in response to climate change and the unfolding ecological crisis. According to Robinson the accounts of hope in “recent environmental literature and in traditional Christian formulations rely on faith in political will, technological innovation, or an omnipotent divine sovereign to intervene and save” (Robinson, 2020). But Robinson contends “such accounts are inadequate for this moment” (Robinson, 2020). A helpful study on *How hope and doubt affect climate change mobilization*, by Marlon et al, reveals two taxonomies of hope: constructive and false hope (Marlon et al., 2019). People who rely on false hope believe God or nature will solve the problem without the need for human intervention. In contrast, constructive hope arises from the belief that humans are capable of changing their behaviour.

Maria Ojala provides further clarity on constructive hope explaining that “constructive hope arises when a person understands the seriousness of climate change and concurrently feels there are positive goals within reach for addressing the issue” (Ojala, 2012, p. 627). Ojala was particularly interested in whether a sense of hope among young people is positively related to pro-environmental behaviors, or whether it is simply a sign of illusory optimism (Ojala, 2012). Her research findings showed that young people who have constructive hope about climate change are significantly more likely to engage in positive environmental behaviors, compared with young people who lack hope or whose hope is based on denial of climate change. Ojala identified three main sources of constructive hope. The first is the ability to describe their concerns about climate change and to reframe them in a different and positive way. The second is identifying trust in sources outside oneself, such as technology or environmental organizations. The third source of hope is the trust in one’s ability to make a difference. Ojala concludes that “hope about climate change is more than an illusion or solace; it could also be an important path to engagement” (Ojala, 2012, p. 638). Both studies demonstrate the critical importance of the source, habitus, and place of hope. For religious education, they set the course for how to focus on hopeful agency and pedagogically address the ecological crisis with children and youth.

Specifically, that implies rethinking hope which begins with the “relinquishment of false optimism” (Robinson, 2020, p. 1) and the acceptance of the reality and enormity of the ecological crisis that con-

fronts us. As Chris Doran has so aptly captured, in embracing hope one needs also to cultivate the ability to “know how to talk about hopelessness” (Doran, 2017, p. 9). Robinson asserts any “credible account of hope will begin with truth-telling, which includes accepting what climate scientists are telling us about the future unclouded by false hopes and coming to terms with human responsibility for our current condition” (Robinson, 2020, p. 7). Borrowing from Miguel De La Torre (2017), Robinson argues that the key to relinquishing false optimism is to embrace hopelessness and the feelings of grief, despair and helplessness that accompany it. And vice versa this means that hope is not exclusive of feelings of despair, hopelessness, or grief.

Hope consists of a broad range of emotions including painful ones (Head, 2016, p. 74). Lesley Head, drawing on Anderson’s geography of hope, develops an understanding of hope premised on the following four aspects. She understands hope as, firstly, a process that creates possibility and potential, or at least opens up spaces in present day reality for things to be done differently. Secondly, hope is not exclusive of melancholy and grief. Thirdly, hope risks disappointments and has no guarantees. Finally, hope is grounded in the everyday and not in some distant future. All these four aspects are embodied or find expression in practices. Head contends that hope is something to be practised rather than felt. The basis for hope, therefore, is in practices rather than emotions. In this way, hope becomes active, engaging and fully present in the world. Brian Treanor articulates this well in stating “to hope is to adopt a certain way of being-in-the world; it is an active, not passive disposition” (Treanor, 2018, p. 11). Hope, “requires our active participation in both the enjoyment of the world and the maintenance and promotion of its goodness” (Treanor, 2018, p. 22). This posture provides a basis for how we can imagine and live in the world differently. Developing and implementing these seems to be a central pedagogical task of religious education in the present day.

Embodied practices of hope in the Anthropocene will require not only, but in particular also from religious education a new story or narrative that values our *interdependent interconnectedness* with the whole of life (the human and non-human creation). The old story powered by colonialism, capitalism justified by Christian narratives of dominion, domination and power have not served humankind well and has led to the degradation of both the environment and the fabric of human relationships. The future and history are written and shaped by the imaginations of those in the present fuelled by their values and vision of what the world could be in the future. In this context, religious education processes can be crucial in creating intentional spaces and platforms for such new imaginings of the future to be imagined and realized.

Finally, hope is cultivated and sustained by the recognition and awareness that we are part of the larger whole grounded in an expanded notion of the Sacred. The resources for engaging hopefully with and in the climate crisis does not and cannot rest in one religious tradition alone. A new and robust account of hope requires the wisdom of “religious and non-religious accounts of spirituality that find the sacred embedded within the world...” (Robinson, 2020, p. 8). It is here that indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities provide a lens through which to live hopefully in the present in view of the future.

## **5. Embodied Practices of Hope in Pacific Indigenous and Faith based Re-Storying**

Indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities play an imperative role in addressing the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity and as such the inclusion of indigenous perspectives in religious education processes is critical. Indigenous communities occupy 20-25% of the Earth’s land surface, and 80% of that land mass holds the world’s remaining biodiversity (Raygorodetsky, 2018). Indigenous Peoples of the world have and still are the protectors of ecosystems. They have been caretakers of the Earth for centuries, but their knowledge has either been devalued or ignored. The Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Mr. José Francisco Calí Tzay asserts “indigenous peoples and their traditional practices, are key to achieve sustainable development, combat climate change and the conservation of biodi-

versity” (UNHCR, 2020). Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are crucial not only for addressing the burgeoning climate emergency but also for navigating the way forward to a hopeful post-COVID, post-growth and post-fossil fuel future.

From this it becomes evident that indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities can help humankind to frame and shape a new story of interdependent interconnectedness and to live this new story through practices of embodied hope. Indigenous communities understand and remind us of the fragile yet vital relationship between human beings and the environment and the critical importance of keeping this relationship in balance. Although diverse and varied in traditions, cultures and practices, indigenous peoples hold and value the sacredness of our interdependent interconnectedness with the whole of life. They understand epistemology, spirituality and being as an integrated whole inclusive of the environment (Bird, Saiki & Ratanabuabua, 2020; Meyer, 2013). They understand that the health and well-being of the earth and human beings are intimately interwoven. Reconnecting the whole of life necessitates a new narrative that shapes how we may live differently into a new future. A case in point is the following example from the Pacific where embodied hope is practised through re-storying the household from a Pacific perspective in anticipation that a new and different future may be realized.

The Pacific, ‘the liquid continent’, is among a number of countries in the world on the forefront of climate change. The Pacific region has been identified as one of the world’s climate change hot spots (Boege, 2018, p. 2). The “most significant effects of climate change include reductions in agricultural productivity; reductions in water quantity and quality, with associated impacts on agriculture, health; increases in climatic events; coastal erosion and inundation as a result of extreme events and sea level rise” (Campbell, 2012, pp. 64–65). The impact and effects of climate change continue to challenge and pressure island economies, habitats, and the livelihoods of people in the region giving rise to a broad spectrum of newly arising economic, social and cultural problems (Boege, 2018, p. 1).

The vision for a renewed story through *Re-thinking the Household of God* in the Pacific was mandated in 2013 at the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) general assembly. The impetus for a renewed vision for the household was the growing discomfort and dis-ease with the destructive economic and ecological impact on the relational well-being on Pasifika peoples and their environment. The vision was the culmination of work that began two decades earlier in 2001 at the global ecumenical conference organised by the World Council of Churches, The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Council of European Churches on the theme of economic globalization. The 2001 conference was hosted by the Pacific Conference of Churches in Fiji on the theme *The Island of Hope: An Alternative to Economic Globalization*. The term “Island of Hope” was described as a “fitting expression of the global, ecumenical concept of the Kingdom of God in the Pacific context” (World Council of Churches, 2002, p. 7). “The Island of Hope” was an alternative vision and practice to the project of economic globalization which entails domination through an unjust economic system (World Council of Churches, 2002, p. 5). The concept prioritises relationships, celebrates quality of life and values human beings and creation over the production of things and in which spirituality, family life, traditional economy, cultural values, mutual care and respect are its main components (World Council of Churches, 2002, p. 3). The ethics of “The Island of Hope” are based on the deep respect for the whole community of life.

The 2001 global ecumenical conference affirmed and encouraged the Pacific Churches to work toward an alternative model of development that is rooted in and takes seriously the Pacific contexts and their traditional-cultural-theological moorings. Ten years later, in 2010, the Pacific Conference of Churches developed a concept document on “Re-thinking the Household of God in the Pacific.” The document outlined five key issues pertinent to the region: (i) governance and leadership; (ii) development in Oceania; (iii) peace and security; (iv) climate change and resettlement; and (v) cultural and social cohesion (Pacific Conference of Churches, 2010). The charge given at the PCC general assembly was a reiteration of the call given more than ten years prior to “rewrite a new story of development, ecumenism, and

faith that is ‘Pacific oriented’ and that which drives an ecological and wellbeing renewal of the Pacific” (Pacific Theological College, 2021). The rewriting of this new narrative of hope is carried out against and in resistance to a historical background of colonisation and subsequent displacement of wild thinking of which embodied practices of hope lie in the recovery and reclaiming of indigenous knowledge and spirituality displaced both by colonisation and Christian missions (see also Bhagwan, Huffer, Koya-Vaka’uta & Casimira, 2020).

*Re-thinking the household of God in the Pacific* prioritizes ecological well-being as a central concept as well as the starting point from which the understanding of theology, economics, culture, and spirituality is reframed. The “household” is understood in its broadest definition and according to its etymological Greek roots, *oikos*, of which economy, ecology and ecumene share. The management of the household or the whole inhabited earth and its inhabitants (*oikoumene*) is dependent on both good economics (management of resources) and ecology (interdependence and integration of the household) (Bird et al., 2020, p. 2). The ecological crisis, as argued by Pacific indigenous scholars, is fundamentally about the whole of life and the interdependent interconnectedness between the human community, development and the environment (Bhagwan et al., 2020, p. xv). Accompanying this understanding is the conviction that the ecological crisis cannot be resolved by scientific knowledge and fiscal means alone. The contribution of indigenous and faith based ecological frameworks (knowledge, ethics and practices) are also required to finding alternative solutions (Bhagwan et al., 2020, p. xvi).

In 2017, in conjunction with the Pacific Theological College (PTC), the PCC launched the Reweaving the Ecological Mat (REM) initiative premised on the knowledge and experience that the neoliberal model of economic development is not appropriate for the Pacific (Bird et al., 2020). REM reframes the understanding of development within an *oikonomical* framework drawing on the three interrelated words: economy, ecology and ecumenical. The *oikonomical* framing aims to “reintroduce a new/old way for measuring wellbeing and wholeness” (Bird et al., 2020, p. xi). REM is constructed around three frames: theology, economics, and cultures and spirituality. Each of these themes privilege ecological well-being and the reclaiming of indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities in reconnecting people with the *vanua* (land). In this reframing “relationality is central to such measurement, as well as the full recognition of and respect for the balance and harmony of all diverse interwoven strands of life” (Bird et al., 2020, p. xi). Wholeness or unity is not possible without relationality. REM is wholistic in its approach. It brings together the strands of theology (Christian faith), culture and indigenous spirituality and economics into conversation, allowing each to inform, resource and enrich. In a context where indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities have been displaced by a colonial Christian narrative, this integrated approach presents a challenge to the region, in particular, to the churches who are generally reluctant to critique their received Christian traditions and theologies. Decolonising educational processes thus becomes key.

Another aspect of the new story of *Re-thinking Household of God* in the Pacific is the vision of a Pasifika Communities University (PCU) grounded on the concept of the “whole of life” approach to education (Pacific Theological College, 2021). The “whole of life” approach is based on the Pacific concept *Itulagi*, a framework that facilitates Pacific thinking to place the “whole of life” at the heart of everything, from politics, economy, religion, social, education, to development. *Itulagi* (itu is ‘side’ and lagi is horizon or skyline) is a Pacific concept about “multiple horizons or multiple skylines that cannot be confined or limited under a linear focus” (Pacific Theological College, 2021). Central to the concept of ‘itulagi Pasifika’ is the notion of relationality that is common to most, if not all, Pasifika cultures and communities (see also Vaai & Casimira, 2017). ‘Itulagi Pasifika’ is premised on three fundamental relational principles, namely: multi-dimensional connectedness, open horizon, and resilience (Pacific Theological College, 2021).

The name of the university reflects the vision of establishing a higher educational platform that is com-



munity-based and community-informed, grounded on the knowledge, faith, and spiritualities of grassroots communities. The objective of the university is to facilitate and produce home-grown sustainable Pacific epistemologies that is also informed by grassroots community life-affirming philosophies, values, and best practices that put the “whole of life” at the heart of theology, education, development, and church mission. This approach to education aims to provide an alternative to counter the colonial and destructive ideological premise that has shaped development in the Pacific. This shift facilitated by the university aims to assist churches, governments, and the wider Pacific communities by “nurturing transformative change through revisiting and reconstructing existing ideological and philosophical foundations of life and development in the Pacific that have contributed to the destruction of the Pacific household of God and its “whole of life” vision” (Pacific Theological College, 2021, p. 4).

## **6. Religious Education for a Renewed Being-in-the-World**

Against this worldwide horizon, the strings are to be brought together in conclusion and opened up for religious education in the sense of a renewed being in the world. To make the elaborated theological, postcolonial, and indigenous perspectives productive for (religious) education and its response to the ecological crisis, a twofold attempt has been undertaken in this article:

On the one hand, the entanglements of Christian missionary societies in Europe's colonial structures of domination, which helped legitimize the exploitation of natural resources, have been deconstructed. This also includes perceiving that in the name of Christianity, the suppression of indigenous forms of knowledge and knowing, which contain a treasure of care for nature and forms of sustainable living, have been legitimized (WCC, 2012). It is about the realization that the ecological crisis is a product of colonization.

On the other hand, the engagement with these historical lines of development, however, opens up the opportunity to re-engage indigenous narratives of hope in religious education processes and to make their alternative world relations constructive, which is fed by a dialogue with indigenous epistemology and spirituality (Lam et al., 2020). Indigenous communities have long been raising their voices to share their knowledge in the ongoing fight against climate change and the growth society. “We want to show the world what it really means to live sustainably. No one understands sustainability better than indigenous peoples” (Rio+20 UN Conference). By means of their local practices and initiatives, they share in educational projects the importance they attribute to cultural values such as respect for nature, sharing in a community, and local traditional knowledge for a healthy and resilient society and a sustainable way of life (Indigene Wege, 2020). This reframing and reimagining of indigenous narratives of hope, in dialogue with Christianity, can enable hopeful, meaningful, and ethical action rooted in solidarity, responsibility, and mindfulness for all life. Engaging them in religious education processes means taking the insights of indigenous peoples' theological reflections as narratives of hope and bringing their indigenous visions of a full, good, and abundant life and their spiritual as well as theological reflections into dialogue with students (WCC, 2012).

As part of general education, religious education has an important task in terms of transformative learning by critically discussing social and global developments and enabling an examination of questions of value and meaning from the sources of the religions. Religious education can thus open up a space in which anxieties and hopes, questions and doubts, insights and visions can be shared, but also fundamental questions can be addressed to the Christian faith: What narratives of God, of humankind and of creation can help to reshape the present in such a way that a good future for all life is possible? And what does it mean as a worldwide Christianity to take responsibility against the destroying of creation? On the basis of this educational dialogue of contexts it is obvious that more than ever there is a need for a “plurality of world references, which today has to take the place of the one-dimensionality of the tra-

ditional rationalism" (Cassirer, as cited in Paetzold, 1995, p. 104). Because one thing has become apparent in the meantime: Rational knowledge alone will not save the world!

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