

Grapes, Olives and Yams: towards a theology of the garden in Oceania

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Abstract: Pursuing a theology of the garden in Oceania, the article develops Ilaitia Tuwera's Fijian theological perspectives with Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy and Talmudic readings. The defining experience in the Oceanic garden is mercy. Through the bodiliness and otherness of Jesus, the chief Gardener, an immemorial truth emerges: the land (vanua) testifies to the mercy (maternity) of God, revealing a garden (were) of justice, repentance, peace, healing and the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, our hope for the reign of God is not useless and for nothing, for it becomes the very source of the fecundity of time and the positive value of history, moving us on with confidence and courage to encounter Edens and Gethsemanes in the Oceanic garden.

Key Words: Eden; Garden; Gethsemane; Levinas; Oceania; Reign of God; Tuwera

An Oceanic theology of the garden concerns the language of otherness and hope for the reign of God. The Oceanic garden, "the garden of yams"¹ so to speak, lies in a realm beyond the essence of self-interest and competing ideologies. Otherwise than rejection and hostility, the garden of sacred soil and plants, "this delicious solitude", transcends the "rude" totality of anonymous and depersonalising behaviour.² In Oceanic culture and theology, the garden is a sacred place revealing an important global dimension. More than a mere sign, the garden of yams orders and ordains the indigenous people of Oceania – Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia – to bear witness to and savour a life otherwise than the "bent"³ world of globalization, secularization, consumerism, environmental devastation and the anarchy of the internet. From the depths of the resurrection effect and the joy of waiting for Parousia, the Oceanic garden

¹ Given that yams have special and sacred significance in Fijian culture, the analogy, "the garden of yams", for the purposes of the paper points to a future world and hope for the reign of God in Oceania. Describing the sacredness of root-crops such as yams, Ilaitia Tuwera writes: "Root crops such as *dalo*, and *uvi* (yam) are described as *kakana dina* (lit. true food) to distinguish them from other vegetables or fruit in a meal. *Kabana dina* are foods whose symbolic value are richest. In old Fiji, their cultivation and production involved ritual observance at definite times of the year. The fact that these staple foods remain in use and rituals continue to be observed – particularly offering of the *i sevu* (first fruit) to the chief and to the church – indicate a cultural constant." Ilaitia Tuwera, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2002), 36.

² References made to Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Garden": "Your sacred plants, if here below, Only among the plants will grow; Society is all but rude, To this delicious solitude." <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/marvell> (accessed June 17, 2013).

³ A reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "God's Grandeur": "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." Gerard Manley Hopkins, selected with an introduction and notes by W.H. Gardner, *Poems and Prose* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books, 1988), 27.

signifies a future world of infinite responsibility. In terms of Levinas' philosophy, the future world refers to "a past that was never present", a testimony "as simple as 'hello'", and an ancient vintage of "what no eye has seen" (Isa 64:4; 1 Cor 2:9).⁴

The land and the ocean, and the gardens and peoples of Oceania are integrally part of this future world. Amongst the faces of the people of the Pacific lies an ocean of good news, root-crop gardens of hope for the reign of God, and islands sprouting tradition, culture, society, otherness and "the ultimate 'face of the land' Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of the Trinity."⁵ Each country, each Island home, holds a common sacred teaching and vocation, namely, to be "called to become God's Garden-community in each place and at the global level."⁶ But to understand and to listen, not only must there be a deep acknowledgement within one's heart and soul of the value of Oceania, but also towards the value of the peoples of Oceania. To use a Levinasian term related to otherness, the Oceanic garden of yams unveils the gift of diachrony, "the one-for-the-other in proximity."⁷ Given the nature of proximity of the Pacific islands to one another, diachrony speaks of hospitality, of being like (diverted by) God to have a "devotion" and "love" of the stranger.⁸

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), the French Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar, developed the concept of diachrony in ethical, phenomenological, and biblical terms. It provides a very useful ethical metaphysical term to inspire theological reflection upon the reign of God in the Oceanic garden. Admittedly, diachrony is an enigmatic concept because it speaks of an immemorial past, a past that has never been present in the raw reality of war, self-interest, exploitation and injustice. In Fijian culture, diachrony shows a resemblance to the "concept of *i cavuti* [naming]", establishing a sense of "identity", "meaning", "belongingness" and "history" in "a piece of land" (*vanua*).⁹ Moreover, "the cultivation and making of the annual yam garden" signifies an encounter of "primeval time" (similar to the sense of "the Australian Aboriginal concept of dreamtime") in the rhythm, beauty and goodness of *vanua*: "the flowering of fruit trees, spawning of fish, appearance of sea-worms on the reefs and so forth."¹⁰ Indeed, diachrony comes to mind through cultivating a sense of peace, mercy and love, that is, something similar to a "biblical covenant, the basis of which is community."¹¹ Where ethics and prayer come together in community, the immemorial divine command to love one another (Jn 13:34) evokes the story of Christ. For diachrony, growing in responsibility for the other through time and in community, can be translated theologically as the resurrection effect, "of the

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony" in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 102-103; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 60, 66-67.

⁵ Tuwere, *Vanua*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 67.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Foreword" in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), xiv.

⁹ Tuwere, *Vanua*, 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

act of God in raising Jesus from the dead.”¹² In animating terms, Levinas describes the dramatic effect of diachrony:

The one-for-the-other has the form of sensibility or vulnerability, pure passivity of susceptibility, passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity in the same, the trope of the body animated by the soul, psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth. Here the psyche is the maternal body.¹³

The idea of diachrony is an inherent warning for theology not to fall into a pit of propositional language. Levinas is wary of such language fuelled by the categories of Being, objectivity and presence, inviting us to think of theology otherwise.¹⁴ In terms of approaching Being (such as reality and existence), we tend to reduce it to our *personal* reality and *egoistic* existence before engaging ethically through freedom, responsibility compassion and sacrifice. The fall into objectivity in comparison breeds a cold and stifling relation where we rely on facts rather than truth. Facts can contaminate and even poison ideas into thematisations or rationalisations, resulting in analogies that espouse racism, arrogance, hatred and even murder. In Australia, we can think of the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, a cruel judgement and analogy that sets out to “generalise” and link the “known and the unknown,”¹⁵ that is to say, reducing the known (the absence of western civilisation) to define the aboriginal people and culture (the unknown). And in the case of employing the language of experience, the temptation is to treat it like a totality and reduce it to *my* experience, a myopic lens that ends in division and breeds human animals (cf. 1 Cor 11:21). So then, the language of theology needs to be wary of falling into onto-theology and the categories of Being, objectivity and presence. In response, we need a language of alterity, of otherness and diachrony, to bring theology into the site of ethics.¹⁶ In an Oceanic perspective, for example, theology articulates a maternal sense of *vanua* (or *were*) as womb or placenta, encouraging patience for the birth of “a kairos moment” of mercy for “the whole cosmos or world” (cf. Matt 5: 5, 7).¹⁷ Contextual theologies like Oceanic theology can help us then to think and act otherwise, creating a sense of otherness, maternity and bodiliness.

Steven Bevans, advocates something close to the language of alterity in his work on contextual theology:

Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; their culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.¹⁸

¹² Anthony J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2008), ix.

¹³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 67.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xi-xv.

¹⁵ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 130.

¹⁶ Glenn Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity: Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis* (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 1-14.

¹⁷ Tuwere, *Vanua*, 93 and Ilaitia Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” in Dennis Gira, Diego Irrarázaval, and Elaine Wainwright (eds.), *Concilium: International Review of Theology (2010/5) Oceania and Indigenous Theologies* (London: SCM Press), 52.

¹⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1992), 1.

Bevan's reflection here on the nature of Contextual theology points to a Levinasian idea of awakening to the traces of personhood in the other's face: their culture, tradition and the way the Gospel inspires the work towards justice and peace. Focusing on the "doing" of Contextual theology leads to diverse perspectives. Choosing but one perspective (like the land or garden) can itself become a theology. On the face of things, if we want then to develop this further, we can speak of "theologies"¹⁹ rather than just "theology", hence "Contextual theologies." Returning now to Levinas' sense of diachrony and otherness (the one-for-the-other), we can move forward to engage our social and cultural context from the "theologies" of Oceania, namely the garden. To this end, Bevans and Levinas provide an important hermeneutical clue. Bevans speaks of the gospel, tradition, culture and society. Levinas testifies to otherness and responsibility. In an Oceanic context, we can ponder: what makes the garden a key milieu of otherness to exemplify Oceanic contextual theologies?

THE GARDEN IN OCEANIA: VANUA, LOTU AND BODILINESS

The respected Methodist theologian and author, Ilaitia Tuwera, provides a Fijian theological perspective on the garden (*were*):

Were garden reflects the world of the Fijians, their values and value system, their original oral culture, language, and epistemology. *Were* is often spoken of as *were-kalou*. As indicated already, *were* is garden, and *kalou* is the Fijian word for god or the deity. The hyphenation *were-kalou* literally means 'garden-god' or 'god-garden' implying that god-is-in-the-garden or the garden-is-in-god. God is *in* the garden and the garden is *in* God, who has always been associated with the *were*. An old Fijian said these words to Revd Allan Tippett, a missionary to Fiji for more than twenty years, in the 1940's: '*Keimami qarave vata na Kalou na iteitei se were.*' (We [exclusive]²⁰ serve together both God and the garden). The two are interconnected so that one is essentially in the other.²¹

In 2005, an article on Oceanic theologians introduced the four leading Islander theologians: Methodist theologians Sione 'Amanaki Havea (from Tonga) and Sevate Tuwera (from Fiji), Uniting Church theologian Bishop Lesli Boseto (from the Solomon Islands) and Roman Catholic theologian Bishop Patelesio Finau (from Tonga).²² After the Father of Pacific Theology, "the late Sione 'Amanaki Havea, of Tonga" who "coined the term 'coconut theology'", Tuwera is considered "the second most important figure."²³ For Tuwera, the God of history is the God of the land (*vanua*). The Fijian proverb, "land is people, people is land"²⁴ unveils a deeply eschatological principle: "the theological

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Foreword" in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by Gary D. Mole (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiv.

²⁰ The exclusive sense of the "we" – as opposed to the inclusive sense – does not make reference to the addressee (that is to say, Revd Allan Tippett). Perhaps in subtle way, by learning from an Oceanic theology, the "we" could change one day to an inclusive sense, so that, for example, western theologians might see the very interconnection and unity between service to God and service in the garden.

²¹ Ilaitia Tuwera, "Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief)," 52.

²² Charles W. Forman, "Finding Our Own Voice: The Reinterpreting of Christianity by Oceanic Theologians," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29:3 (2005), 116.

²³ Forman, "Finding Our Own Voice," 116.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

discourse about the end of the human person and of history”²⁵ is a function of the land. Moreover, there is an implied bodiliness of the land and the people together: the people suffer through the sufferings of the land (or the land suffers through the sufferings of the people); the people are wounded through the woundedness of the land (or the land is wounded through the woundedness of the people); and the people enjoy through the enjoyment of the land (or the land enjoys through the enjoyment of the people).

Bodiliness itself finds some biblical resonance. For example, John’s Gospel relates: : “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). Here Jesus, encouraging the disciples to move towards the love of friendship, expresses a path towards joyful fulfilment and bodiliness: that the disciples enjoy through the enjoyment of Christ in them. And Christ’s joy, taking root and growing in the disciples, gives hope for friendship (Jn 15:14) to mature into a spontaneous sense of responsibility and otherness wherein an ethical, kenotic and paschal speech comes to mind. Such otherness demands facing Jesus’ demands and commands with joy. Joy and obligation come together producing a difficult freedom and a difficult adoration. The difficult freedom is to take up an “In-finite” responsibility for the other. The sense of “In-finite” here connotes God-in-the-finite, the awakening of the risen Christ in the other’s face. And the sense of a difficult adoration speaks of openness towards God’s word in the other’s face to the point of being both ordered and ordained to journey into her/his world and heart. Both the practice of a difficult freedom and a difficult adoration further points to the joy of the reign of God: being-for-the-other. Moreover, such ethical and prayerful practice and bodiliness identifies a “non-thematisable”²⁶ realm, namely a kingdom beyond the totality of self-interest, objective facts and representations of egoistic experiences. In terms of transposing this to the concept of *vanua* (land/people),²⁷ the non-thematisable (resisting the violence of political and economic injustice) reign of God is represented as both person and land, namely Jesus Christ and the garden respectively. The Fijian proverb, “land is people, people is land” can further extend our imagination biblically and theologically. The sense of the land as garden has both protological and eschatological perspectives as we think of the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Olives (Gethsemane). And in a developing Trinitarian context, the garden of yams is the place of “religious conversion” to the reign of God, encouraging the one working in the “sacred soil”²⁸ to adore the Father, to breathe through the breath of the Holy Spirit and to live in the light of the Word.²⁹

Proclaiming the reign of God, Jesus-in-the-garden invites us to “focus on wondrous new hopes.”³⁰ Let us imagine then that Jesus, the “chief Gardener”³¹, carries an ancient and immemorial invitation. He invites us to *vanua* (the world, land and people), the very garden of yams, to listen to the Spirit, embrace the Father’s will, and learn the art of justice, mercy and sacrifice. Moreover the more we meditate, contemplate and work in the

²⁵ Peter C. Phan, “Foreword” in Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), ix.

²⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 52.

²⁷ Tuwere, *Vanua*, 212.

²⁸ Matt Tomlinson, “Sacred Soil in Kadavu, Fiji,” *Oceania* 72:4 (June, 2002): 237.

²⁹ Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 209.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

³¹ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 57.

garden, the more it becomes fertile with the “true food” (*kakana dina*)³² of truth and grace. Yet grace might not be unearthed so easily. Just as wisdom puts her servants to the test (Sir 4:17), so *vanua* will put her people to the test of humility to face a “persecuted truth”³³ demanding conversion to the reign of God and to Jesus-in-the-garden. In Fijian language and culture, there are many pairings. One of these is between *lotu* (worship or Christianity) and *vanua*. Pairings provide a “fundamental organizing principle of many Fijian rituals, and less formal events as well.”³⁴ There is the saying, “In Fiji all things go in pairs or the sharks will bite.”³⁵ The pairing between *lotu* and *vanua* represents an engaging tension³⁶ that gives the possibility for ethical transcendence, to encounter God’s reign, and to work with (follow) the “chief Gardener”,³⁷ Jesus the Christ. Given that Jesus proclaims the very essence of God’s reign (cf. 1 Cor 2:9: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”), the Oceanic garden represents a time and place of pairing where *lotu* and *vanua* are called to enrich one another and nurture other pairings: man and woman, justice and mercy, and peace and healing “to the far and the near” (Isa 57:19).

However the garden also reveals another more disturbing pairing. An Oceanic and Fijian Creation myth may help us to uncover this. *Ratumaibulu* (literally, “the standing-one below the earth”) is the Fijian “god of growth and fertility”, an androgynous being embodying “the centre and life-force of humanity.”³⁸ Tuwere explains:

The Fijian creation story points out that *Ratumaibulu*, god of growth and fertility, has a body. The entire *were* is her/his body. All crops including yams, bananas, dalo (taro), corn, and so on in the garden are different parts of her/his body. Because they are different parts of the one body of *Ratu*, they belong together. Each part is essentially part of the whole. When one part suffers the whole garden is affected in one way or another.³⁹

Despite the goodness of bodiliness in the *were* (garden), there exists a “haunting” pairing in the Fijian story of creation. The *were* is a place of “survival” and “promise” just as it is a site division and suffering.⁴⁰ And more disturbingly, there lies a terrible ambiguity, enigma, and confusion in the pairing – an inability to discern the difference between survival and promise on the one hand, and division and suffering on the other. In Levinasian terms, this is characterised dramatically as a menacing presence, “the horror of darkness”, “the absence of God”, the anonymous stirring of the “there is [il y a]”, depersonalising existence, and as insomnia, fatigue, and indolence.⁴¹ Levinas’ dramatic imagery can be illustrated whereby the earthly representative of *Ratumaibulu*, *Tui* (King)

³² Tuwere, *Vanua*, 36.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, “A Man-God?” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated from the French by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55.

³⁴ Tomlinson, “Sacred Soil in Kadavu, Fiji,” 237.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁷ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53. See also, Tuwere, *Vanua*, 41-43, for a full explanation of the whole creation-myth.

³⁹ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 53.

⁴⁰ Milad Doueihi, *Earthly Paradise: Myths and Philosophies*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 18-19.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 58-59, 69, 78.

or *Turaga* (Chief) does too much sitting rather than bending (service, work in the garden) to the point of abandoning and running away from the garden (as illustrated in the Fijian Creation story). He becomes, like the “there is”, “an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm.”⁴² Consequently, the land including the garden will become useless and a locus of “nothingness.”⁴³

The haunting ambiguity is like the horror of losing sense and meaning of God’s presence in the service of the *were*. As a result, the otherness of bending and working in the *were* becomes a past that has never been present, a transcendence⁴⁴ that falls into confusion with “uselessness” and depression. Tuwere makes a poignant remark: “Some observers believe that this is slowly happening in the unsettling political situation in present-day Fiji. And something must be done to arrest this downward trend.”⁴⁵ Yet the confusion and ambiguity does not necessarily represent the last word. Something can be done. Out of the fatigue and indolence that ravages confusion and ambiguity enters a diachronic hope that “at the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible.”⁴⁶ The *were*, recalling the Garden of Creation, also recalls the Garden of Olives, Gethsemane, wherein the kenotic and Trinitarian praxis of the suffering Christ comes to mind.

GRAPES, OLIVES AND YAMS: FROM EXILE TO HOPE IN THE GARDEN

Philip Gibbs provides an important theological principle and lens: “Life is a hermeneutical key.”⁴⁷ Oceanic theology has an affinity to draw connections between ethical and prayerful human experiences with the natural environment.⁴⁸ The *were*, or garden, provides a natural Oceanic context. Yet, the challenge always remains for every generation how to safeguard it as a place of ethical metaphysical or transcendent emotions (like contrition and joy) to orient a language of faith, hope, and love. This is important for the garden does not only represent physical realities, but also metaphysical and spiritual ones. Given that “life is a hermeneutical key”, looking at the narrative of salvation history provides an opportunity to interpret and give meaning to what often lies at the centre of human experience, namely suffering and joy, the promise of peace, and the grace of mercy in the midst of the struggle for forgiveness and the hope for healing. Let us then consider together the gardens in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament drawing from systematic theology, Levinas’ philosophy and Talmudic reflection, and Oceanic theology. From a Christian theological perspective, the biblical movement from the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8) to a “garden” (John 18:1), “a place called Gethsemane” (Matt 26:36, Mk 14:32) in the Mount of Olives (Matt 26:30, Luke 22:39) or “the mount called Olivet” (Acts 1:12), is

⁴² Ibid., 58.

⁴³ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 53; and Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 64.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1988), 166.

⁴⁵ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 53-54.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 92.

⁴⁷ Philip Gibbs, “Emerging Indigenous Theologies in Oceania,” in Gira, Irrarázaval, and Wainwright (eds.), *Oceania and Indigenous Theologies*, 35.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35.

exemplary, archetypal and instructive of our human condition. Moreover it deepens the biblical and dialectic experience of suffering and joy.⁴⁹

The departure from Eden (Gen 3:22-24) brings to light a defining experience of human existence – exile. The man and the woman are expelled from Eden, the paradise of hearing God walking “in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen 3:8). The garden of Gethsemane lies on the hither side of the “lost paradise” and “future world” of Eden.⁵⁰ Gethsemane, an ancient olive vineyard, must always be seen in the light of another vineyard, a more ancient garden, “irrigated by that which no eye has ever seen ...” (Isa 64:4; cf. 1 Cor 2:9), namely Eden. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin 99a*) explains this in terms of eschatological hope: that in a “future world” of “miracles” and “repentant sinners” near the end of history, humanity will return to Eden and find a garden adorned by a vineyard.⁵¹ And what shall a repentant humanity discover in the garden? A “wine that has been kept [maturing] with its grapes since the six days of Creation. A famous vintage! An ancient wine that had not been bottled, or even harvested. A wine not given the least opportunity to become adulterated.”⁵² According to Levinas, the return to Eden does not denigrate history itself. The exile from Eden leads us to the sense of *felix culpa*, from human fault to benefit. Every human person bears the trace of Eden and exile. And such a trace witnesses to a grace and calling to encounter new Edens, discover new gardens, in our exile.

The human condition of exile challenges us to face the demands of the day with courage and confidence. Giving meaning to our exile helps us to respond creatively and draw out a theological imagination “that we are always in the presence of God.”⁵³ We can ponder and imagine theologically like the Rabbis in the Talmud that just as there is an ancient vintage of a future world maturing in the Garden of Eden and awaiting our return, so there is also a paschal vintage of salvation maturing in the Garden of Gethsemane, and beckoning our presence. And transposing the Talmudic wisdom to a Christian theological context, we can suggest that the garden of olive groves signifies “a time of greater perfection than that of the happiness tasted in the garden of paradise.”⁵⁴ “Thrown out of paradise”, our suffering and exile is “non-useless” and not “for nothing.”⁵⁵ We are thrown into the world (*vanua*) to work with Jesus, “the Christ of God, the chief Gardener”⁵⁶ at Gethsemane, and to testify to the “fecundity of time” and the “positive value of history.”⁵⁷

Whereas the man and the woman “tasted happiness”⁵⁸ in the Garden of Eden, the Christ tasted sorrow in another ancient garden, Gethsemane. The sense of sorrow is accentuated by the symbolism and folk law attached to olive trees. Olive trees are known

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. VII Theology: The New Covenant*, translated by Brian McNeil C.R.V. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 534.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 67.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60, 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁵³ Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 34-35.

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 67-68.

⁵⁵ Levinas, “Useless Suffering” in *Entre Nous*, 100.

⁵⁶ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 57.

⁵⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 67-68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

to grow over 500 years. Moreover, “the olive trees of Gethsemane ... [a]ccording to popular folk law ... are thousands of years old and were growing during the time that Jesus was alive.”⁵⁹ Olive trees speak therefore of something immemorial, bearing a trace of an anarchic (without origin, literally the unoriginated) time, denoting an appeal of God-in-the-finite (In-finite) or the sense of God’s immemorial transcendence of “*In the beginning when God created the world*” (Gen 1:1). Olive trees also bear something almost kenotic about their condition. As they age, the trunk becomes hollow. Like Christ self-emptying himself before God the Father, olive trees evoke an “extreme grief.” The following Jewish version of a common folktale among Jews and Arabs places “a human face” to the olive tree’s “hollowing trait”⁶⁰ and grief:

The Jewish version describes widespread grief and mourning throughout the country after the second Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. To demonstrate their extreme grief, all the trees of the country shed their leaves. After the trees were bare, they noticed the olive tree, which is by nature evergreen, still retained its leaves.

Representatives of the trees approached the olive and asked, “Why don’t you shed your leaves in grief over the destruction of the Temple?”

The olive responded, “You, my brothers, show your grief on the outside for all to see. My grief will be carried within for all times.” And so it is, that each year the olive eats away at itself in grief and sorrow until it is nothing more than a hollow strip of bark.⁶¹

Stories help us to uncover truth and develop our theological imagination. In many ways, the olive tree itself represents Christ’s paschal and kenotic character of bodiliness and diachrony (responsibility to the point of expiation for the other through time). Praying to the Father in the Garden of Olives, “yet not what I want but you want” (Matt 26:39), the chief Gardener, Jesus the Christ, could well be voicing the psalmist’s prayer: “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever” (Ps. 52:8). Here we may also turn to the Fijian wisdom of the garden: “*Keimami qarave vata na Kalou na iteitei se were.*’ (We [exclusive] serve together both God and the garden). The two are interconnected so that one is essentially in the other.”⁶² Drawing on from the Fijian theological imagination, we can see the bodiliness, truth and unity between Jesus and Gethsemane. God’s good creation speaks through Christ and the olive tree; they are one (Ps 52:8). Creation’s grief hollowing the olive tree symbolically testifies to the true beauty and good truth of Christ the chief Gardener’s kenotic love for humanity and all creation.

The Jewish version of the olive tree’s grief over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem serves to show the need recognise that suffering cannot simply be leashed by rationalisations, ideological interpretations or even “infantile religious feeling.”⁶³ Suffering is often a deeply internal experience. Henri Nouwen implies that the movement from suffering (such as loneliness) to a cognitive experience of suffering (through prayer and solitude) cannot readily be reduced to “articulation and understanding.”⁶⁴ Suffering is “so close” that “it is very hard to come in touch with it, to get a grasp on it, to get hold of it, or

⁵⁹ Michael Brown, “A Tree Pilgrimage in Israel,” *American Forests* 112:4 (2007): 34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶² Tuwera, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 52.

⁶³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 143.

⁶⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (London: Fount, 1996), 84.

even – to put a finger on it.”⁶⁵ Perhaps the Oceanic garden represents a place to meet suffering in an interpersonal way. Hans Urs von Balthasar succinctly explains, “The deeper the suffering, the more our concepts fail us.”⁶⁶ The Oceanic garden then takes us beyond our totalising tendencies to a realm of non-indifference. In phenomenological (and Levinasian) terms, we can gain the insight that suffering speaks of a *noesis* [“the act of consciousness itself, the *cogitation*”] without a *noema* [“the objectifying act, the *cogitatum*”].⁶⁷ In other words, the encounter of suffering in the innermost part of the self identifies a realm beyond the being of pride, envy, selfishness, hostility and acedia (spiritual torpor). This “beyond” signifies the realm of transcendence, love and the word of God in the Oceanic garden. Taking a diachronic form of otherness, the outpouring of grief and suffering in the Oceanic garden, relates the “kingdom of a non-thematizable God.”⁶⁸ In the Jewish folklore, the olive tree remarks, “My grief will be carried within for all times.” There is something deeply paschal and revealing here. And when the Psalmist remarks, “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God”, we can almost touch upon the symbolism of the olive tree and Christ, of a mutual indwelling between the Garden and Christ Jesus. This is further telling because it reveals that Christ – “the chief Gardener,” the immemorial vintage (John 1:1) and olive tree (Ps 52:8) – testifies to both Eden and Gethsemane as the messiah and Son of God.

“In” (recalling the sense of God-*in*-the-finite) the gardens of Oceania – on land or in the sea – remain the traces of Gethsemane and Eden. Eden, therefore is not necessarily a lost paradise, but a future world that Gethsemane proclaims through suffering, prayer and love. Gethsemane recalls an Edenic diachrony of responsibility: “the relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present ... [an] everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others.”⁶⁹ Hence, Christ in *vanua*, amongst the Oceanic “gardens of yams”, reveals a theo-logic: that freedom begins with having a sense of possessing a covenant with God and with the community witnessed through the diachrony of time (“the lost time” that the world does not know) and the patience – the form of obedience and “anticipation” (of “death”)⁷⁰ – of Gethsemane: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Matt26:42).

The garden of Gethsemane also serves to move us from a state of exile and suffering to the hope (“spark”) of “eternal joy.”⁷¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks:

Thus the Christian dialectic of joy and Cross points to a mystery in the heart of God himself, where there reigns ‘greater joy’ in pardoning a sin that has caused pain (Lk 15:7), and where a feast must be held to celebrate the return of the one who had run off and been lost (Lk 15.23,32) and had caused the father so much suffering: indeed, more than this, where the Father causes the pain to himself by abandoning his much-beloved

⁶⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 148 (from *Der dreifache Kranz* (Einsiedeln, 1977), 64-67).

⁶⁷ Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity*, 230. See also, Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation” in *Entre Nous*, 175.

⁶⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 52.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁷¹ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. VII*, 533.

only Son to the darkness, in order to have the joy that 'whoever believes in him should not perish, but should have eternal life' (Jn 3.16).⁷²

Given the Son is the forgiveness of sins, he holds the "fecundity of time" and the "positive value of history." Through a Trinitarian self-giving of love at Gethsemane, Jesus the chief Gardener of "grapes, olives and yams" breathes the hope of the Holy Spirit. And hoping in the garden of sacred soil, he bends in prayer envisioning the cross. By working in the garden and cultivating obedience to the Father's will, the Son reflects the ancient vintage and future world of "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard" (1 Cor 2:9). As the Messiah-in-the-garden, he now deeply grieves (Matt 26:38) over the destruction of "this temple" (Jn 2:19). Prostrating, working and praying in the sacred soil, he knows that his exile (and ours) does not end in death, but in victory over death in and through his resurrection. So the Christ's work of prayer unveils "a mystery in the heart of God": the garden is a place of otherness to the point of expiation, the "greater joy" of forgiveness, and the foretaste of eternal life.

Tuwere, transposing a Fijian creation myth to a Christian theological context, gives light to the garden as the locus of otherness and "right-relationship":

in the creation myth *kalou* means god or deity. The second syllable *lou* refers to the state of the yam garden when it is all covered by the intertwining green yam leaves during September and October or spring time. This time of year is called *vula itubutubu* (month of growth). *Kalou* (God) therefore means 'living reality,' or 'giver of life.' *Lou* stands for fullness of life in the *were*. This fullness of life is brought about by the exercise of right relationship in the entire garden.⁷³

Tuwere's reflection on the fecundity of God (*Kalou*) in the yam garden during Spring initiates a sense of divine maternity as the source of life in the garden. *Kalao* (God) is "the giver of life." Bringing von Balthasar's theological aesthetics and Tuwere's contextual transposition together, we can gain the insight that the Oceanic garden is the place and source of mercy (maternity), forgiveness and the meaning of life, and a locus to encounter God's "living reality" – the "greater joy" over the repentance of sins and the healing of broken relationships. The Oceanic garden, therefore, containing the sacred soil, vegetables, fruit and trees, signifies God as the Giver-of-life. And in all the gardens of the Pacific, whether in, for example, Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand, Papua New Guinea or the Cook Islands, "to exercise right relationships" unconceals an immemorial and diachronic trace of Eden and Gethsemane: a future world and a revelation of Christ as the forgiveness of sins. Where there are political and social conflicts such as "the unsettling political situation in present-day Fiji"⁷⁴ or economic poverty, environmental threats and family feuds going back generations, the Oceanic garden henceforth signifies an ever-present hope of the "greater joy" and "living reality" of God's mercy and reign.

⁷² Ibid., 533. Balthasar's emphasis on the Father's suffering and abandonment of the Son serves to theologially dramatise how an "infinite distance" between the Father and the Son underlines "the sinner's mode of alienation from God." Moreover, Balthasar further explains that such "infinite distance" highlighting the sinner's God-forsakenness "will remain forever the highest revelation known to the world of the diastasis (within the eternal being of God) between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. II. Dramatis Personae: Person in Christ*, transl. By Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 228.

⁷³ Tuwere, "Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief)," 57.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 54.

Together, the gardens and peoples of Oceania offer a vision of “greater joy” and “the fullness of life”, namely “the intertwining green yam leaves” of freedom and responsibility. Freedom instils the courage and confidence to face the horror of anonymous and depersonalising evil. And responsibility yields a response of prayer and sacrifice, the practice of forgiveness, the gift of oneself for others, and the ability to hear God’s word in the neighbour’s face. The sense of the Oceanic garden speaks intimately of hope for the reign of God. And for sense to mature into meaning, the *were* invites a liturgy of responsibility to work amongst the yams in the hope of yielding the freedom of the risen Christ. And further, just as the Gardens of Eden and Gethsemane extend through and beyond time to communicate God’s Kingdom, so “the *were* or garden” extends to the ocean as well: “The *were* or garden we are now exploring has to do not only with what we see growing on the land but the sea or ocean as well.”⁷⁵

CONCLUSION: THE OCEANIC GARDEN OF MATERNITY AND MERCY

Developing a theological perspective of the ocean, the Tongan Anglican theologian and bishop, Winston Halapua provides an instructive reflection on “God the Ocean”: “In the word *theomoana* – ‘God the Ocean’ – *moana* is used to express the world-encompassing, interconnecting nature of God. The use of ‘*moana*’ points to the God of flowing unity, whose being is ever life-giving, dynamic and embracing.”⁷⁶ He identifies five key qualities at the heart of *Theomoana*: “1. *manaakitanga* (hospitality), 2. *moana/tikanga* (identity), 3. *kotahitanga* (unity and diversity), 4. *talanoa* (sharing stories/flowing together)) and 5. *taonga* (the sharing of gifts).”⁷⁷ These five qualities reveal that lying at the heart of the peoples of the Pacific (*vanua*) is something inherently “Trinitarian” and perichoretic, namely the “dynamic rhythm” and “flowing” of personal relations.⁷⁸ The God of the Universe who is also the God of the Oceans (*Theomoana*) weaves an Oceanic gift, as it were, of hope for the reign of God. These five qualities inherent in God’s reign portray an ethical and eschatological vision for the Oceanic garden, covering both land and sea. Yet, the challenge for the peoples of Oceania is not to lose a sense of the garden and its traces of Eden and Gethsemane. Tuwere, bringing to light a maternal and universal sense of *vanua* (land) and *were* (garden), reflects:

To be cut off from one’s *vanua* or *were* is to be cut out from one’s source of life, one’s mother as it were. *Vanua* and motherhood are identical. And *were* or *vanua* may refer to a village, an island, a people, or simply a given place. The whole of Oceania or even the whole cosmos or world may be called a *were*.⁷⁹

There is an important connection to be made between the Oceanic garden and motherhood. It is important because it gives voice to the maternity of God, namely mercy. Emmanuel Levinas helps to provide a biblical context through his Talmudic reflection on the word, “Merciful”, in relation to naming God as “the Merciful One”:

⁷⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁶ Winston Halapua, “Theomoana: *Toward an Oceanic Theology*,” in Gira, Irarrázaval, and Wainwright (eds.), *Oceania and Indigenous Theologies*, 26-27.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁹ Tuwere, “Jesus as Tui (King) and Turaga (Chief),” 52-53.

First, what is the meaning of the word merciful (*Rakhmana*), which comes back constant in this text? It means the Torah itself or the Eternal One, the Eternal One defined by Mercy. But this translation is altogether inadequate. *Rakhamim* (Mercy), which the Aramaic term *Rakhmana* evokes, goes back to the word *Rekhem*, which means uterus. *Rakhamim* is the relation of the uterus to the *other*, whose gestation takes place within it. *Rakhamim* is maternity itself. God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element stirred in the depth of this mercy.⁸⁰

At the heart of the Tri-personal God is relationality and maternity. Through welcoming family, friends, strangers and enemies, working towards an identity of otherness through time (diachrony), achieving a sense of non-indifference (unity and diversity), taking the courage to be vulnerable and move towards conversation, there is the maternity of sharing stories and gifts. And in the Oceanic garden of God's reign, a maternal and eternal, divine gift awaits: mercy. Giving fecundity to time and a positive value to history, the garden gestates the promise and story of mercy: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matt 5:7). To be maternal and merciful like the garden of yams in Oceania is to witness to the Father's reign and resurrection effect: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

The Oceanic garden of "grapes, olives and yams", unveiling the traces of Eden and Gethsemane, yields the trace of "the maternal element in divine paternity."⁸¹ The garden in Oceania par excellence represents the locus to be merciful and maternal like God, savouring hope for miracles, the repentance of sins and the healing of broken relationships. Our exile from Eden is not useless and for nothing. Nor is our condition of sharing Christ's suffering in Gethsemane. The Oceanic garden, whether of the land or of sea, possesses the truth of bodiliness: to be merciful in the mercy of God. And to partake of the "true food" of mercy in the garden is to drink of an ancient and Edenic vintage of a future world of "what no eye has seen" (1 Cor 2:9) as much as it is to take to heart Christ's suffering at Gethsemane and become like the olive tree, "A good olive tree, fair with goodly fruit" (Jer 11:16). Of "grapes, olives and yams", we encounter the "delicious solitude", substance, beauty and otherness of the Gardens of Eden and Gethsemane revealed in the goodness and hopes of the peoples and gardens of Oceania. Together, this reveals hope for Oceanic theologies to draw value from contextualisation, insights from enculturation and the challenges of inculturation.

Theology itself owes much to the tradition of onto-theology. But Pacific theologies can help western theologians to overcome the failings implicit in onto-theology, and allow reason to inform faith in a garden of mercy and hope for the reign of God. In this way, an Oceanic theology of the garden teaches us to journey beyond Being (and ontological tendencies to reduce God to totalising tendencies) towards "possessing peace and love"⁸² and even risk returning to Being (ontology) with a Trinitarian praxis of adoring the Father, working with Jesus the Chief Gardener and breathing hope through the Holy Spirit. The

⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Damages Due to Fire, From the Tractate *Baba Kama*, P.60a-b" in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Indiana IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 183.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸² Morrison, *A Theology of Alterity*, 34.

benefits of encountering and learning from Oceanic theologies are truly instructive and fulfilling, leading not only to discovering new opportunities to bring Jewish and Christian theological themes together, but also to appreciate the theological value of the land and garden for the peoples of the Pacific. Learning from the theologies and theologians of Oceania, we may then perhaps enter a garden of “grapes, olives and yams”, and realise how the practices of forgiveness and mercy lead us to Christ and the promise of peace and healing.

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