

Religion and Risk: Unmasking Noah's Narratives in the Pacific Islands

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Abstract : Pacific Islands are one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change. Sea level rise and accelerating storm surge continuously threaten the communities' habitats on low-lying atolls. With scientific predictions of encroaching tides on their land, the Islanders have been informed about the need for future relocation planning. However, some communities oppose such retreat strategies through the reasoning that comprehends current climatic changes through the lenses of the biblical ark of Noah. This parable states God's promise never to flood the Earth again and never deprive people of their land and habitats. Several interpretations of this parable emerged in Oceania, prompting either climate action or denial. Resistance to relocation planning expressed through Christian thoughts led religion to be perceived as a barrier to dialogue between the Islanders and scientists. Since climate change concerns natural processes, the attitudes towards environmental stewardship prompt the communities' responses to it; some Christian teachings indicate humanity's responsibility over the environment, whereas others ascertain the people's dominion, which prompts resistance and sometimes denial. With church denominations and their various environmental standpoints, competing responses to climate change emerged in Oceania. Before missionization, traditional knowledge had guided the environmental sphere, influencing current Christian teachings. Each atoll characterizes a distinctive manner of traditional knowledge; however, the unique relationship with nature unites all islands. The interconnectedness between the land, sea and people indicates the integrity between the communities and their environments. Such a factor influences the comprehension of Noah's story in the context of climate change that threatens their habitats. Pacific Islanders experience climate change through the slow disappearance of their homelands. However, the Western world perceives it as a global issue that will affect the population in the long-term perspective. Therefore, the Islanders seek to comprehend this global phenomenon in a local context that reads climate change as the Great Deluge. Accordingly, the safety measures that this parable promotes compensate for the danger of climate change. The rainbow covenant gives hope in God's promise never to flood the Earth again. At the same time, Noah's survival relates to the Islanders' current situation. Since these communities have the lowest carbon emissions rate, their contribution to anthropogenic climate change is scarce. Therefore, the lack of environmental sin would contextualize them as contemporary Noah with the ultimate survival of sea level rise. This study aims to defy religion constituting a barrier through secondary data analysis from a risk compensation perspective. Instead, religion is portrayed as a source of knowledge that enables comprehension of the communities' situation. By demonstrating that the Pacific Islanders utilize Noah's story as a vessel for coping with the danger of climate change, the study argues that religion provides safety measures that compensate for the future projections of land's disappearance. The purpose is to build a bridge between religious communities and scientific bodies and ultimately bring an understanding of two diverse perspectives. By addressing the practical challenges of interdisciplinary research with faith-based systems, this study uplifts the voices of communities and portrays their experiences expressed through Christian thoughts.

Keywords : Christianity, climate change, existential threat, Pacific Islands, story of Noah

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