



Priests in the observatory: rethinking climate science and religion in a warming world

Adam Bobbette

To cite this article: Adam Bobbette (2023) Priests in the observatory: rethinking climate science and religion in a warming world, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 139:1-2, 99-102, DOI: [10.1080/14702541.2022.2157866](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2157866)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2157866>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Dec 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 452



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Priests in the observatory: rethinking climate science and religion in a warming world

Adam Bobbette

School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the possibilities of re-thinking what a climate change observatory might be. Rather than reproducing science as usual, climate change observatories assembled with faith institutions, might open new potential for experimental environmental knowledge practices. The essay examines these ideas through an account of an experimental environmental observatory based in churches in the Solomon Islands.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 June 2022


Accepted 5 December 2022

KEYWORDS

Climate change; Solomon Islands; religion; observatories; environmental science

Climate change is a religious reality. Not only does the majority of the world's population consider themselves to be, broadly, religious, but a great number of the scientists who conduct climate science, or who are at least concerned with the changing climate, also consider themselves to be religious. This means that the very meaning of a changing climate can be instructively inflected by the narratives and lifeways that make up those religious traditions. Moreover, the science of climate change itself, as much as it purports to be secular and modernist – consider the IPCC reports which frequently invoke the grand narratives of scientific modernism to stave off scepticism and denialism – cannot be disentangled from the deep histories of religious narratives. The COPs have evidenced the interests of religious communities in climate change; organisations from the diversity of world religions have been in attendance in significant numbers and global Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist organisations are some of the most active in organising a response to climate change, even engaging civil society in ways sometimes more profound and effective than many governments.¹ Yet, the question remains resolutely thorny, in particular for human geographers: what does the religious reality of climate change mean? Does it change the way we understand the often-assumed distinction between religion and science? Does taking seriously the religious dimension of climate change open up opportunities for human geographers to re-think climate knowledges, and perhaps help us imagine new forms of environmental knowledge?²

These questions emerged for me during an experiment in the Solomon Islands. In 2018, I undertook fieldwork there to establish the feasibility of implementing a network of observatories that would monitor climate change related environmental

CONTACT Adam Bobbette  adam.bobbette@glasgow.ac.uk  School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

changes (sea level rise, shoreline change, storm duration and intensity). The idea was to use an existing network of Anglican Churches as observatories because there were not sufficient government infrastructures to undertake the task. A conventional approach would have been to fly in scientists and infrastructures from powerful wealthy states but this would have reproduced colonial forms of development, entrenching local dependence on foreign know-how and aid. Instead, I was interested in an observatory system that could contribute to creating grassroots conditions for the creation of local skills, knowledge, infrastructure, and self-determination. Imagining that churches could perform the functions of observatories opened up a series of possibilities for re-imagining the production of climate knowledge. First, it would mean piggybacking on the existing infrastructures of Anglican Churches such as the circulation of people and objects in the archipelago via the churches vessel *The Southern Cross*. It would also mean utilising pre-existing reliable structures of worship: every church had a priest or lay-person who looked after church services on a strict schedule. In broad terms, the necessary social and material infrastructures already existed for basic scientific observation – regularity, discipline, networks, and hierarchies of information flow. The headquarters of the Anglican Church in Honiara could act as the central archive for observations.

My proposal had the enthusiastic support of the Archbishop of Melanesia, local, British, and Australian bishops, as well as oceanographers in the UK and Australia who were keen to participate because they saw the dearth of on-the-ground observations in the South Pacific, a region at the frontlines of the climate crisis.

The project, however, was not meant to enlist local observers in a far-away place for the production of conventional climate change data in metropolitan centres in the Global North. The ambition of the project was to re-think what it meant to observe climate change. It was clear from the very beginning of my time in the Solomon Islands that climate change was conceived through a Christian lens.³ Rising sea levels and increased intensities of storms, for instance, aligned with already familiar biblical imagery. It was also clear for many bishops and priests that I spoke with in Honiara that the causes of climate change were the responsibility of the wealthy west and its twinned histories of colonialism and industrialisation. A number of bishops I spoke with were interested in Ecotheology, a tradition related to Liberation Theology but more deeply grounded in the Christianity of the Pacific. They were also influenced by environmental struggles emerging from the Cold War period and anti-nuclear protests in the region. Ecotheology, in the vision of these bishops and priests, was also a decolonial form of Christianity because it looked to Pacific traditions of environmental knowledge which predated missionisation in the late nineteenth century and, in many instances, they saw persisting in the present. Knowledge about ocean patterns, fish communities and habitats, seasonal cycles, mangrove behaviour and resilience, had been severely threatened by Christianisation but were also being revived. For a number of Bishops I spoke with, Christian missionaries fundamentally misunderstood the environmental impact of local religions and as a response the bishops were experimenting with new assemblages of Christianity and local spiritual practices.

The opportunity to build a climate change observatory within churches allowed for the possibility to bring all of these things together. In my view, it simply is not enough to use citizen science as opportunities for scientists to access the free labour of enthusiastic lay-people or reinscribe Global Northern standards of doing climate science.⁴ The Anglican Church of the Solomon Islands *as* an observatory opens the possibility to think anew

what it means to observe and document a changing world; it creates the opportunity to imagine the observatory as a physical space in which multiple ways of knowing nature converge: Christian, Global Northern climate science, indigenous, pre- and post-colonial. This could then, perhaps, shed some light on how to think the global nature of both climate science and the global effects of climate change. It is a commonplace for geographers to analyse the uneven global effects of climate change, but at the centre of that is still the question of what makes the globe. Likewise, climate science is understood to be an exemplary global science. But does rethinking the production of climate change observatories also help us re-think the nature of the globe beyond the familiar categories of the local and global? If the globe is viewed from the Solomon Islands it is at once Christian, pre-colonial, yet utterly contemporary; the globe from there is already opened by ways of knowing that are at once mythical and scientific. Noah's staff is embedded in one of the islands, other islands were pulled up from the water in mythical time by a boy who was fishing; an observatory of the present can bring these stories together, assemble them in new configurations to help make a changing climate newly legible.

By the time that the COP26 delegates rolled out of Glasgow, the Anglican Church of Melanesia Environment Observatory had finished its first one-year trial taking measurements at four churches in the archipelago. The observatories were measuring rainfall, temperature, water levels, beach profiles, and shoreline positions. Data was being collected and prepared for open access distribution on the observatory web platform.⁵ One member of the team circulated part-time between the sites to collate data and provide technical support. One year on, the observatory is looking to expand. The challenges are substantial – enlisting participants, the lukewarm commitment of a new Archbishop, a busy church organisation with many demands on its attention, newly complicated geopolitical conditions in the South Pacific – but the local and international enthusiasm for the observatory is acute. There is very little work that is trying to re-imagine the social role of the climate change observatory in a warming world, let alone envisioning how observatories can become new contact zones between religion and climate science. For this, the Solomon Islands is truly at the vanguard.

Notes

1. See, for instance: Haluza-DeLay (2014), Voeldman et al. (2014, pp. 7–9), Hulme (2017), and Sadouni (2022).
2. Human geographers and historians of science have long acknowledged that the distinction between religion and science is porous and complex. See, for instance, Ethan Yorgason and della Dora (2009). There remains, however, very little work in either field on how climate change science is inflected by religion.
3. See also Crook and Rudiak-Gould (2018), Bobbette (2019), and Fache and Fair (2020).
4. I acknowledge that many conversations around citizen science and participatory science have sought to engage with similar critiques and to rethink the nature of participation in the production of knowledge. See Dawson et al. (2020) and Skarlatidou et al. (2022).
5. See <https://acomobservatory.wordpress.com/monitoring-sites/>.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the reviewers and journal editors for their helpful feedback on this essay.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Bobbette, A. (2019). Priests on the shore: Climate change and the Anglican Church of Melanesia. *GeoHumanities*, 5(2), 554–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2019.1644962>
- Crook, T., & Rudiak-Gould, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Pacific climate cultures: Living climate change in Oceania*. De Gruyter.
- Dawson, T., Jambly, J., Kelley, A., Lees, W., & Miller, S. (2020). Coastal heritage, global climate change, public engagement, and citizen science. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(15), 8280–8286. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912246117>
- Ethan Yorgason, E., & della Dora, V. (2009). Geography, religion, and emerging paradigms: Problematising the dialogue. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10(6), 629–637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360903068100>
- Fache, E., & Fair, H. (2020). Turning away from wicked ways: Christian climate change politics in the Pacific Island region. *Anthropological Forum*, 30(3), 233–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2020.1811953>
- Haluza-DeLay, R. (2014). Religion and climate change: Varieties in viewpoints and practices. *WIREs Climate Change*, 5(2), 261–279. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.268>
- Hulme, M. (2017, July 15). Climate change and the significance of religion. *Economic and Political Weekly*, LII(28), 14–17.
- Sadouni, S. (2022). Religious action to address climate change: The international platform. In S. Sadouni (Ed.), *Religious transnationalism and climate change: The role of non-state actors* (pp. 51–70). Palgrave.
- Skarlatidou, A., Fraisl, D., Wu, Y., See, L., & Haklay, M. (2022). Extreme citizen science contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and opportunities for a human-centred design approach. *Sense, Feel, Design. INTERACT 2021. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 13198, 20–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98388-8_3
- Voeldman, R. G., Szasz, A., & Haluza-DeLay, R. (2014). *How the world's religions are responding to climate change: Social and scientific investigations*. Routledge.