Turning Away from Wicked Ways: Christian Climate Change Politics in the Pacific Island Region

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Abstract

Based on the cross-referencing of ethnographic materials collected in Fiji and Vanuatu, this article explores the diverse ways faith and climate change are connected together and how these connections are sustained and transformed over time. It does so through the prism of three 'practices of assemblage' identified by Tania Murray Li, namely forging alignments, authorising knowledge, and reassembling. It emphasises the partnership and combined efficacy of faith-based organisations and the Bible in these practices, while revealing the role of various other actants including God, NGOs, youth activists, cyclones, a Ni-Vanuatu canoe, and Fiji's Presidency of COP23. This approach highlights the coexistence, in both Fiji and Vanuatu, of a religiously informed and adaptation-oriented environmental stewardship narrative, stressing human responsibility in the face of climate change, with a counter-narrative considering climate change as God's business. This coexistence sometimes creates tensions between worldly and religious responses to climate change. These different religious perspectives of climate change can also be deployed as a political resource in nation-building processes, regional power relations, and international climate negotiations. In Oceania indeed, climate change appears as a new arena in which the inextricable entanglement of Christianity and politics is revealed.

Key Words: Climate change; religion; politics; Fiji; Vanuatu

1. Introduction

Climate change in Oceania appears as a complex assemblage of heterogeneous elements. This assemblage includes both human and non-human actants as well as a wide array of objectives, discourses and knowledges. Despite discursive attempts to purify scientific and religious knowledges, it connects scientific findings and projections with Christian rationales and narratives (Kempf 2017). This paper builds on the combination of reception studies and assemblage theory used by Wolfgang Kempf to analyse the connection between climate change and tsunamis made by Kiribati's inhabitants (Kempf 2019), and the focus on the 'work/labour of assembly' proposed by Adam Bobbette to explain the relationship between climate change and the Anglican Church in the Solomon Islands (Bobbette 2019). Through the analytical prism of the 'practices of assemblage' identified by Tania Murray Li (2007), we aim to problematise the presumption that in Oceania, where the overall importance of Christianity has been well documented (for instance, Barker 1990; Stewart and Strathern 2001), faith is merely 'a barrier to awareness of and adaptation to climate change' (Mortreux and Barnett 2009, 110). Three 'practices of assemblage' help us to explore the diverse ways faith and climate change are connected together and how these connections are sustained and transformed over time. The first one, *forging alignments*, consists in linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage; the second one, *authorising knowledge*, involves the definition of the assumptions and knowledges holding the assemblage together; the third one, *reassembling*, touches in particular on the reworking of existing elements for new purposes (Li

2007). We particularly highlight the complementary role of two (categories of) actants in these practices: faith-based organisations, who (re-)shape local understandings of climate change, while being themselves transformed by climate change (see also Bobbette 2019); and the Bible, with some of its parts and specific verses gaining prominence in the context of climate change, even though they permit multiple interpretations (see also Tomlinson 2013a).

This approach also allows this paper to contribute to the field – still insufficiently explored (Jenkins, Berry, and Kreider 2018) – of the impact of religion on climate change politics: it illustrates that Christianity significantly contributes to shape the contours of climate change politics from the local to the global level, and *vice versa*. This article also goes a step further: while the mutual co-constitution of Christianity and the political in Oceania is well-established (Tomlinson and McDougall 2013, 2), we argue that climate change appears as a new arena in which the inextricable entanglement of Christianity and politics is revealed.

A third contribution of this paper is that it derives these reflections on practices of assemblage and on the nexus of 'climate change – Christianity – politics' from the cross-referencing of ethnographic materials collected in Fiji and in Vanuatu respectively (Figures 1 and 2). Although these two case studies have been explored separately, within the frame of different research projects, this paper shows that the *a posteriori* comparison of certain aspects provides new empirical insights.

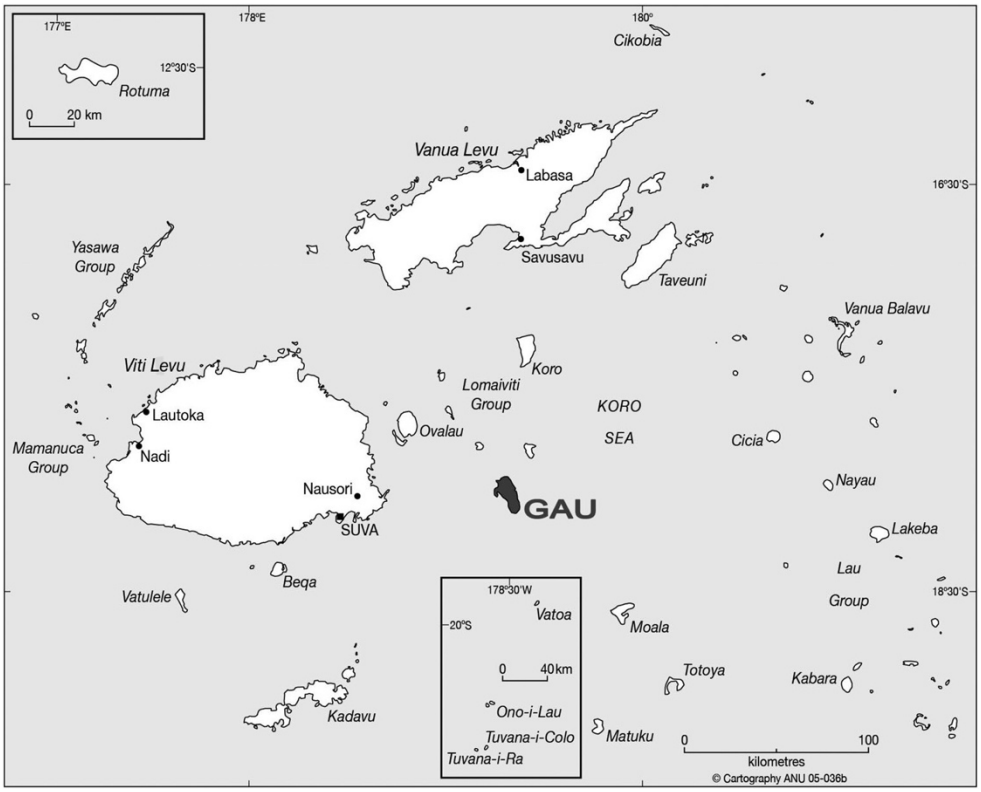

Figure 1: Map of Fiji highlighting Gau island. Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University (http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/mapsonline/base-maps/fiji), modified by the authors.

1.1 Outline of this paper

After some brief background information on our data collection methods and our two case studies, we will first explore how faith-based organisations promote religiously informed and adaptation-oriented

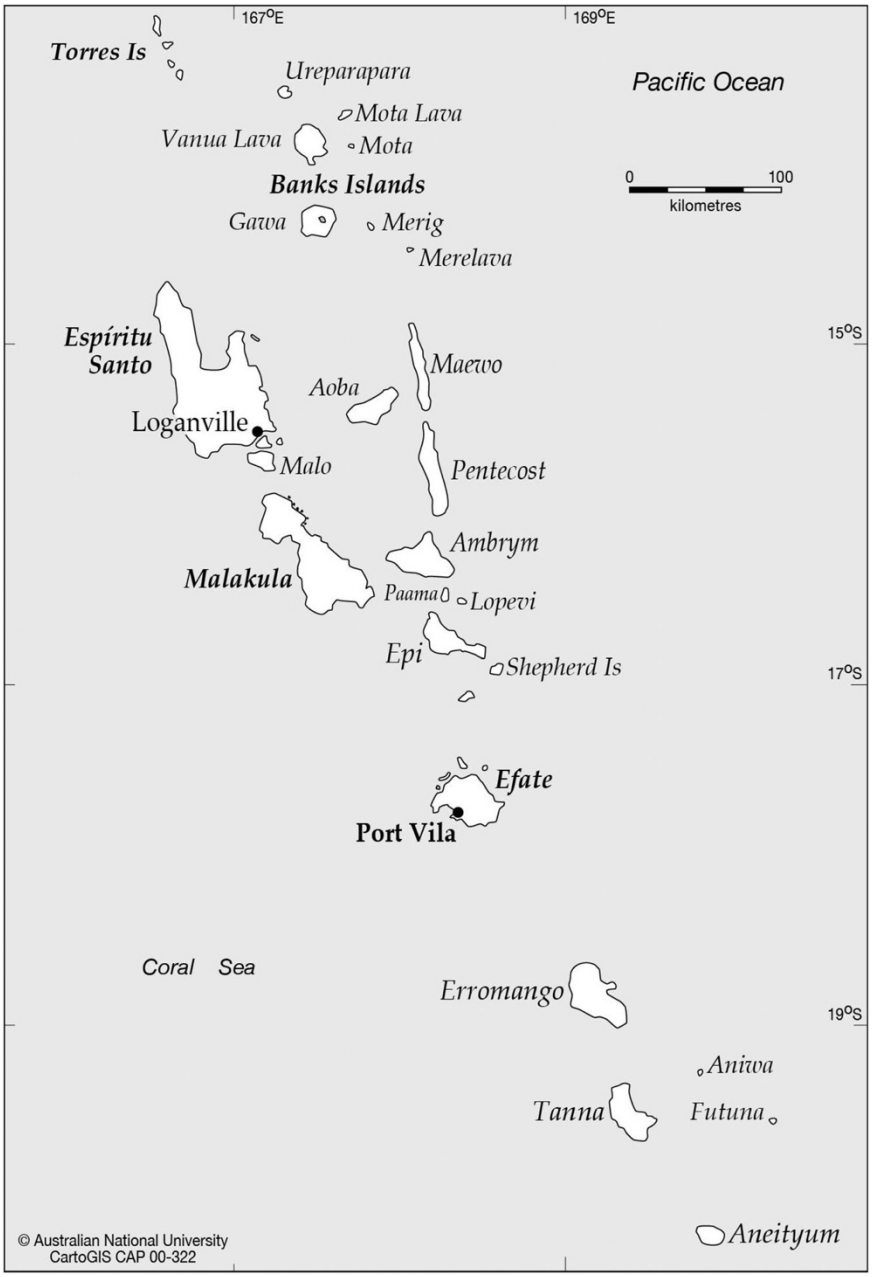

Figure 2: Map of Vanuatu.
Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University (http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/mapsonline/base-maps/vanuatu).

ideas of environmental stewardship from local island settings to global climate negotiations, and how some climate-focused NGOs consciously engage with faith-based organisations to both raise awareness and encourage action among Pacific islanders. We will highlight that scriptural passages and interpretations are used as both praxis and politics (Kempf 2017) in these two complementary forms of climate advocacy.

Then, we will show that the practices of assemblage here at stake, *forging alignments*, *authorising knowledge* and *reassembling*, do not only result in this environmental stewardship narrative drawing attention to human agency, but rather in the coexistence of the latter with a counter-narrative articulating climate change as 'God's business' and stressing divine agency. This counter-narrative implies that spiritual and moral responses to climate change are at least as important as practical adaptation action (for instance, planting

mangroves and native trees, constructing compost toilets, or shifting gardening patterns), or even sometimes induces a rejection of worldly responses to climate change. These Christian understandings of climate change are here again both based on and expressed through an emphasis on specific parts and verses of the Bible.

Finally, we will illustrate that, in both Fiji and Vanuatu, religious understandings of climate change are not only mobilised as a cultural resource (Hulme 2017) legitimising or potentially undermining climate action, but also as a political resource. The examples we will present reveal tipping points when the religious stances produced in the frame of the 'climate change in Oceania' assemblage are deployed to challenge an internal or external political status quo.

1.2. Methodological Perspectives

Both of us have conducted ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with various categories of actors, in post-cyclone contexts, in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclones Winston (Fiji, 2016) and Pam (Vanuatu, 2015) respectively. The contrasts between our complementary methodological practices are outlined in Table 1.

The cross-referencing of our separately collected data was further elaborated through triangulation with secondary sources on the connections between climate change and religion in Fiji and Vanuatu, and more generally in the South Pacific region.

Table 1: Complementary methodological practices

E Fache	H Fair
2016: six months of fieldwork in Fiji, including four months on Gau island (Lomaiviti Province), on the representations, uses and management of a local reef fishery	2014–2015: over sixty interviews conducted with Pacific- based climate advocates, priests and religious figures from a range of denominations
2017: review of secondary sources related to the preparation and conduct of COP23[1]	2014: one month of fieldwork with campaign group the Pacific Climate Warriors in Australia
2018: (one year after COP23) two months of fieldwork in Fiji, including one month on Gau on coastal fisheries	2015: four months of fieldwork in Port Vila, Vanuatu

1.3. Christianity and Climate Change in Fiji and Vanuatu: Background Context

Both the populations of Fiji and Vanuatu are predominantly Christian. In these two settings, Christianity has indeed been indigenised (Jolly 1992, 342) and become a crucial part of the fabric of social life (Douglas 2007, 162). Whereas Vanuatu has a Christian population of more than 80%, 'only' about two-thirds of Fiji's population are Christians (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2007), encompassing nearly all *iTaukei* (Indigenous) Fijians, Hinduism and Islam being far more popular among Fijians of Indian descent (Tomlinson and McDougall 2013, 15). In Fiji, Christianity remains dominated by the Methodist Church, which was established by Wesleyan missionaries in the nineteenth century, and has undergone several changes of direction over the last half-century, mirroring shifts in both church leadership and national politics (Weir 2015). The Methodist Church in Fiji is indeed not monolithic, as emphasised by its guiding

[1] The acronym COP refers to the annual Conference of the Parties to the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

vision for the next decades: 'New Exodus', a call to movement and transformation, allowing Methodist ministers and communities to adopt diverse visions of the promised land and necessary journey (Neal 2017). The nation's four coups since 1987 have also fractured the religious landscape (Tomlinson and McDougall 2013, 15): many other Christian denominations are present throughout the country, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists (SDA), Jehovah Witnesses, and Pentecostal and evangelical movements (such as the Assemblies of God, the New Methodist Church, and various Baptist groups) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1996, 2007). By comparison, 28% of Vanuatu's population are Presbyterian, 15% are Anglican, another 12% are Roman Catholic and 12% are SDA (VNSO 2009). The remaining 13% of the Christian population is spread across a number of different smaller denominations, including the Church of Christ, the Assemblies of God, the Neil Thomas Ministry and the Mormon Church.[2] These new church movements spreading throughout Vanuatu have to some extent filled the organisational space opened by the colonial state apparatuses, and are therefore producing state forms and effects (Eriksen 2013, 106).

Fiji and Vanuatu are considered vulnerable to the impacts of climate-related changes to the physical environment. These are already occurring and expected to intensify (Howes, Birchenough, and Lincoln 2018; Kempf 2020). We have personally observed that these island countries' inhabitants commonly associate recent extreme weather events, such as category-five Cyclones Winston in Fiji and Pam in Vanuatu, with the notion of 'climate change'. Their perception and experience of the world might however diverge in many ways from scientific observations and predictions about 'climate change' (e.g. Lata and Nunn 2012 for Fiji; Pascht 2019 for Vanuatu). In particular, in both Fiji and Vanuatu, the term 'climate change' tends to be used to indiscriminately encompass a wide range of disasters (Walshe et al. 2018), mirroring Connell's (2003) observation about the 'garbage can logic' connecting all environmental changes and problems to 'climate change' in Tuvalu and in the Carteret Islands.

Both Fiji and Vanuatu have increasingly engaged in the global climate change arena over the last decade. Fiji's Presidency of COP23 in 2017 (while held in Bonn, Germany, for logistical reasons) was the first time a small-island state chaired a COP, and this emphasised Oceania's leadership within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. COP23 was even dubbed the Island COP or the Fiji/Pacific COP (Carter 2017). Vanuatu has also made notable interventions into global climate negotiations, for example through making submissions on gender and direct finance to the COP19 in 2013 (PCCP 2013) and by threatening to sue fossil fuel companies (Watson, Shelley, and Tuysuz 2018).

2. Faith-Based Advocacy for Climate Change Awareness and Action

We begin by looking at two complementary forms of faith-based climate advocacy that are anchored in Fiji and Vanuatu but have implications from local contexts to global forums. Religious beliefs and practices do not systematically make a case for respectful relationships to the environment (Rubow and Bird 2016, 151). Yet, in the ethnographic examples that we will now present, faith-based organisations are designing and promoting a specific Christian vision of climate change and of how humans should face it, based on an environmental stewardship narrative. They also engage in awareness-raising and adaptation projects on the ground through partnerships with NGOs that consciously approach them in order to stimulate local climate change appreciation and action. These aspects are both based on the deployment of a repertoire of precepts bolstered by the weight of biblical authority.

[2] Such figures should only be treated as broadly indicative, as the 2009 census (the most recent available at the time of writing) only offers a generalised and somewhat dated snapshot, and does not fully represent the complex mixture of identity, belonging or religiosity at a given time.

We argue that these examples illustrate how faith-based organisations that have a presence in Fiji and/or in Vanuatu (including local Churches and their leaders) are actively and increasingly engaging in the above-mentioned 'practices of assemblage' contributing to put and hold together the heterogeneous elements involved in climate change in Oceania, namely *forging alignments*, *authorising knowledge* and *reassembling* (Li 2007). Faith-based organisations involved in climate advocacy appear to be connecting their own interest in governing the conduct of Pacific sinners (see Kempf 2020) with on-the- ground external interventions for climate change adaptation that assume that these Pacific Islanders need to be instructed about appropriate responses to climate change. These organisations are also striving to link their spiritual mandate to global-level injunctions for all human beings and especially for Indigenous people to be part of the solution to climate change.[3] The development and maintenance of these different connections rely on a biblical exegesis oriented towards the spiritual, moral and ethical responsibility of Pacific Islanders for combatting and adapting to climate change, and more generally for adopting environmentally friendly behaviours. In this exegesis, the overall argument of human stewardship of God's creation is often combined with the selection of specific Bible verses, used to draw attention to and make sense of climate change impacts in local settings, and also sometimes to facilitate the local appropriation of adaptation-oriented innovations.

2.1. A Religiously Informed Narrative of Environmental Stewardship

A key example of how Pacific faith-based organisations promote ideas of religiously informed and adaptation-oriented environmental stewardship can be seen in the response of those anchored in Fiji to the country's presidency of the COP23 summit. This response included two significant documents that we will now briefly highlight, respectively from the United Methodist Church and an ecumenical body.

Firstly, the United Methodist Church produced a prayer guide inviting Christians to join in its efforts 'to advocate for the care of God's good creation' during each day of COP23 (6–17 November 2017). In this prayer guide, the message was straightforward: climate change is an anthropogenic phenomenon that has to be urgently tackled by humans, as the stewards of God's creation, 'each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents' (extract from the second encyclical quoted in the prayer guide, see Pope Francis 2015, 13). The guide affirmed, for instance, that 'All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it ... God has granted us stewardship of creation' (UMC 2017, 4). Two specific biblical passages supporting this stance were quoted: Psalm 104 to remind that 'God ordered the entire world so that all would have enough', and Psalm 65 to stress that 'God delights in the flourishing of creation' (UMC 2017, 2 and 6).

Secondly, a COP23 Multi-Faith Charter was promulgated by a group of faith-based organisations in Fiji with the support of the COP23 Presidency Secretariat. This charter could be read and endorsed via the official COP23 website. In particular, it asserted:

> We believe that we are not the owners of the earth, but are its *custodians*, and that we are *entrusted by the Creator with the stewardship of this planet* ... As *custodians of this great planet*, it is our *moral and ethical responsibility* to collectively take urgent action to do all that is possible to combat climate change and save our planet and humanity. (COP23 Multi-Faith Charter 2017; our emphasis)

In this charter, the idea of human stewardship/custodianship of the planet was combined with a three-point statement, urging for (1) the rapid reduction of carbon emissions in line with the 1.5°C goal, (2) the development of an effective 'Facilitative Dialogue' to allow for the achievement of this first aim, and (3)

[3] For instance, see https://unfccc.int/LCIPP (accessed 10 June 2020).

the global community's multi-faceted support of small island developing nations' climate change mitigation/adaptation and disaster risk reduction endeavours.

This Charter was highly supported by the Methodist Church in Fiji, which claims an 'ongoing work on stewardship of creation' (Vakadewavosa 2017). This stewardship work is carried out not only in relation to global climate negotiations, but also at the national and local levels, as revealed for instance by two Methodist pastors (*italatala*) interviewed in 2018 on Gau island. The first pastor observed that during the opening of the 2018 annual general meeting of the Methodist Church in Fiji, the president of this Church, Reverend Dr Epineri Vakadewavosa, and other speakers made references to climate change, and asked people, for instance, not to put 'rubbish into the sea' and not to release 'smoke into the air' (quotation from the interviewee). Also, he highlighted that the Methodist Church in Fiji supports the new national legal ban on the fishing, sale and export of all species of Grouper (*kawakawa*) and Coral Trout (*donu*) during their peak spawning months; it was indeed one of the first institutional champions of the 4FJ campaign, which supports this ban. Interestingly, the pastor justified this involvement in climate change advocacy and fisheries management policy by introducing the idea that the Methodist Church now supports the government in all respects, no matter who his leader is or what its decisions are; a position that has to be considered in the light of the frequent description in the recent past of the Methodist Church as an opponent of Prime Minister Bainimarama (Weir 2015).[4]

The other pastor asserted that to manifest their relationship to God, people have to take care of their environment (from their backyard to the entire universe), instead of polluting it. He related this assertion to the following Bible verse, which he considered as a call for cultivating and guarding our planet instead of abusing and destroying it, as well as a 'message to counter climate change' (quotation from the interviewee): 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it' (Genesis 2:15). When discussing what this entails, he always came back to what he saw as a core issue in the coastal village in which he lived and more generally in the district under his ministry: God did and do not produce any 'rubbish', only humans produce 'rubbish' (in particular domestic waste and CO2), which they tend to scatter in their environment; they now have to change their 'mentality' and clean up as we have only one planet. On a local and practical level, he was therefore trying to set an example by making sure that he and his family would not scatter domestic waste around their house, and was also thinking of organising a litter cleaning-up campaign.

In this environmental stewardship narrative, climate change is thus intrinsically connected with God's creation and the Bible, but is also part of a more encompassing chain of association that includes different environmental issues, such as littering and overfishing, and that spans over various spaces: land, sea and air, from individual backyards to the Earth and universe.

2.2. Engagement of Climate Projects with the Bible and Local Churches

As the advocacy of the Methodist Church in Fiji illustrates, this environmental stewardship narrative is closely related to concrete modes of action. This is particularly the case when NGOs turn to faith-based organisations and religious teachings in order to raise awareness about the urgent need for community-level climate change adaptation and communicate particular adaptation techniques.

[4] In December 2006, Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama overthrew the elected government of Laisenia Qarase. This coup was followed by eight years of military rule. Then Bainimarama was sworn in as the Prime Minister in the general elections of September 2014, and won a second term in the general elections of November 2018, during which his FijiFirst party secured a narrow majority.

Such an initiative is well illustrated in the case of the German development organisation, GIZ, that produced a religiously orientated presentation on climate change to be used in partnership with local Churches in Vanuatu. As its author explained:

> Then I use all these bible verses and show pictures of what's happening and then like I try to explain it in like a way which [allows for] more understanding. And then they just love it ... And they just took my powerpoint presentation and just use it all over the place, like another pastor wants it and then there's another one wants it and [they] just transferred the document to everyone. (Moses,[5] youth climate activist)

The presentation demonstrates the potential for the Bible to foreshadow current climate change impacts, explain them through parallels with biblical precedents, or give advice on practical adaptations that can be implemented. It also illustrates the three above-mentioned key practices of assemblage as well as the potential for the assemblage to fracture.

Drawing upon the fluidity with which biblical material can be used to tell a multiplicity of stories, scriptural passages are deployed to new ends, namely as explanations of current environmental changes. For instance, the verse 'A salty spring cannot produce fresh water' (James 3:12)[6] is treated in the presentation as a direct reference to the problem of saltwater incursion into freshwater lenses, although it is often read as a reference to the contradictions of people using their mouth to both curse and praise God, or good and evil emerging from the same source. Further examples of *reassembling* can be found in the use of the stories of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6–9) and of Joseph and the Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41) by climate-focused NGOs, who mobilise both figures as icons of preparation, encouraging identification between ark building and storing food from years of plenty with contemporary acts of climate change adaptation (Fair 2018, 9–10).

This grafting of contemporary environmental experiences onto religious instruction also enables the practice of *forging alignments* between diverse objectives at the local level, those of Christian practices and climate adaptation. For instance, 'It had been planted in good soil by abundant water so that it would produce branches, bear fruit and become a splendid vine' (Ezekiel 17:8) is treated in the presentation as spiritual endorsement for the construction of compost toilets as a means of creating 'good soil', and consequently an attempt to govern the environmental conduct of the presentation's audience. Yet descriptions of the aforementioned vine are commonly interpreted as an allegory for the status of Judea in relation to Egypt following the Babylonian invasion (Fishbane 1984). This raises questions about how *knowledge is authorised* within the assemblage: scientific knowledges of climate change adaptation are bolstered through biblical references, yet simultaneously prioritised above theological readings, thereby perpetuating a secular hierarchy of knowledges (Kempf 2017).

While faith-based organisations appear very active in the dynamic of aligning religious instruction and practices with the objectives of climate-focused actors, the latter are increasingly aware of the benefits they can draw from such alignment. In particular they attempt to take advantage of the local Churches' huge potential in terms of disseminating adaptation-oriented ideas. According to some interviewees, one of the advantages of their greater engagement with the Churches is the access it provides to a communication system of enormous reach compared to that of the Vanuatu state or to the capacity of either local or international NGOs. Certain interviewees also suggested that the Churches' existing youth

[5] Here and below, we use pseudonyms to respect the anonymity of our interviewees.
[6] In this paper, the biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version, in line with that used by GIZ, or were copied from the Bible used by the interviewees to a field notebook, on site.

groups and recreational and social programs could easily incorporate topics related to climate change, and would then reach far greater audiences than an externally organised meeting regarding climate change ever could. As one interviewee emphasised, working through a Church would also give community members greater ownership over the adaptation initiatives, as they would occur within a space 'that belongs to them'. Churches thus become essential to the practices of assemblage, as they have the capacity to draw together a far greater pool of actants. Consequently, when establishing village-based committees to oversee new adaptation projects in Vanuatu, some international NGOs now make a practice of ensuring there are representatives from local religious institutions included, and utilise time in church services as a means of advertising these projects.

However, by contrast, some expatriate NGO workers expressed considerable resistance to the idea of working more closely with the local Churches or explicitly incorporating scriptural passages into their communication supports. This scepticism was often justified with reference to the secularism and impartiality of the NGOs concerned and the risks of discriminating or dividing communities through denominational differences. Consequently, with some actants deliberately resisting the forging of alignments, rejecting the convergence between secular adaptation and religious objectives due to concerns about denominational bias, the assemblage must be recognised as fragile, with the ongoing potential to transform or disassemble.

3. Counter-Narrative: Divine Agency and Godly Responses

The Christian understandings of climate change we found on Gau, Fiji's fifth biggest island, and in Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital city, do not fully fit within this environmental stewardship narrative built by faith-based organisations and their NGO partners. Rather, they illustrate the heterogeneity and flexibility of religiously informed views of climate change that remain despite the assembly work of this combination of actors, and point out the challenges of holding the assemblage together over time. As we will now highlight, some of these local understandings tend to place divine agency in opposition to the scientific discourse of anthropogenic climate change (for instance summarised in Fache, Dumas, and De Ramon N'Yeurt 2019). This is associated with modes of religious-based climate apathy (an inactivity or indifference in the face of climate change), or even sometimes with a rejection of worldly responses to climate change. That said, the islanders concerned do not necessarily see the above-presented narrative and this counter-narrative as mutually exclusive. This showcases an ability to alternate between multiple rationales of climate change according to the context and over time, or to hold several rationales in mind at once, including dual thinking that embraces multiple epistemologies (Fair 2018).

3.1. Divine Causation

In both Fiji and Vanuatu, some of our interviews revealed beliefs that God controls 'nature' and, therefore, climate change is made by God and can only be eventually stopped by Him.[7] For instance, in Malawai, one of the 16 villages of Gau, Peter – an *iTaukei* (indigenous) Fijian in his late fifties, member of the local 'All Nations Christian Fellowship' Pentecostal congregation, held this view and considered that it was for instance supported by Psalm 135:5–7:

[7] Yet, Amanda Bertana (2020) documents that in Fiji some religious leaders suggest that God gave humankind control over 'nature'. This further illustrates the heterogeneity of religiously-informed views of climate change, as highlighted in this paper.

> I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.
>
> The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.
>
> He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

He articulated this view with an understanding of climate change as prophesised in the Bible, as a sign of the end of the age, that is of the second coming of Jesus Christ on Earth. For instance, Peter was asked in 2016 whether there were references to 'climate change' in the Christian scriptures. In particular, he mentioned Matthew 24:1–8, and explained that this echoed Mark 13, Luke 21, and the Book of Revelation, as these Bible passages all announce the end of the age. According to him indeed, climate change, just like earthquakes explicitly mentioned in these passages, is one of the signs that the end is coming, and therefore not a source of worry (see also Haukali 2014, 78–79).

Paralleling these sentiments expressed by Peter in Fiji, some interlocutors in Vanuatu also emphasised weather as solely in divine control, thereby contesting the anthropogenic origins of climate change. For instance:

> The word of God says that it is not for you to worry about the weather ... Nature is controlled by God. Then for us to try to solve climate change, we can't. Because only God will say what happens tomorrow. (Deborah, Anglican Church)

Views of climate change as foretold in the Bible and heralding the end of the age were also expressed by some Ni-Vanuatu interlocutors.

3.2. Climate Change as a Call for Spiritual and Moral Changes

In both Fiji and Vanuatu, the view that climate change is God's business was connected with the idea that extreme weather events, such as Cyclones Pam and Winston, are both divine chastisements for misconducts and divine messages aiming to encourage people to improve their behaviour, in particular to demonstrate a greater respect for God as well as for both Christian and customary values.

For instance, in 2018, the above-mentioned *iTaukei* interviewee was asked why the totem fish of his village was no longer as abundant as it used to be. He turned to his Bible to highlight that this is because 'the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land' (Hosea 4:1–3), who 'go out from God's way' and 'go their own ways' (quotation from the interviewee), which for instance involves specific practices such as poaching in the village's *tabu* area (i.e. periodically harvested marine reserve) as well as broader aspirations such as looking for 'gold and silver' (quotation from the interviewee, clearly referring to Zephaniah 1:18). He then explained, using two specific Bible verses (2 Chronicles 7:13–14), that more generally, when people go out from God's way, He always intervenes in three domains: He takes away their food, for instance fishes; He brings forth bad weather, for instance Cyclone Winston; and He can also send them sickness. This is to make these people realise that they have to 'turn from their wicked ways' (2 Chronicles 7:14), that is to go back to God's way or 'what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2), humble themselves (see also Cox et al. 2020), and manifest their repentance and devotion (including by going to church, praying, serving God with both one's mind and heart). If they do so, God 'will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land' (2 Chronicles 7:14), 'sin' referring here to 'all wrongdoing' as explained in 1 John 5:17. More generally, in Fiji, 2 Chronicles 7:14 is one of

the key Old Testament texts 'thought to set out the paradigm of post-disaster humility and repentance' (Cox et al. 2018, 392).

Against this backdrop, Peter argued that God sent Cyclone Winston to remind people that the pursuit of the Kingdom of God should be their priority, as prescribed by Matthew 6:33, instead of thinking first about money and business. Like many other Fijian Christians, he indeed saw capitalist development as an immoral pursuit that challenges both the Christian and traditional relations, morals and obligations inherent in 'the Fijian way' (Toren 1999; Nolet 2018). He suggested that the path of the cyclone and the importance of the damage it caused reflected different degrees of respect for this precept. He used this rationale to explain why Gau island was relatively unscathed by this cyclone, whereas further north in the same Province, Koro island was devastated (see also Cox et al. 2018). In Vanuatu, Cyclone Pam's impacts were also considered morally charged by some. The shape of its path, as it almost entirely avoided the northern islands of Malekula and Santo, was commonly attributed to the fact that those communities keep strong *kastom* (indigenous belief and practice). Some people in Port Vila also identified Cyclone Pam as a message sent by God to instruct the inhabitants of Vanuatu to live righteously:

> God is speaking to us through nature, so when Cyclone Pam strike people say: 'What is God saying to us?' Maybe God is speaking to us through nature maybe because of the way we live so we need to change the way we live. (Andrew, Presbyterian Church)

According to this minister of the Presbyterian Church, these changes in accordance with God's plan included not only sexual morality but also practices of environmental stewardship, such as avoiding deforestation or single-use plastics. Therefore, in the case of Vanuatu, the turning away from wicked ways explicitly aligns with pro-environmental action, rendering all Ni-Vanuatu responsible for climate action.

In this counter-narrative, articulated around specific Bible passages and verses, climate change is connected with the end of the age rather than with creation, but is here again part of a network of heterogeneous elements, including weather, cyclones, the geography of the damages they cause, nature, but also fish, single-use plastics, money, and so on. Climate change is seen as a call for spiritual and moral changes, including a revival of traditional lifestyles in which *kastom* practices and the Fijian way are paramount (see also Nolet 2018). These spiritual and moral responses are deemed at least as important as technical practices of climate change mitigation which they sometimes dovetail with. However, some faith-based responses to climate change entail an explicit renunciation of such alignment of religious and worldly action.

3.3. Rejecting Worldly Responses

Spiritual and moral responses are indeed considered by some islanders, at least in some contexts, as the only appropriate human reaction to climate change. As the manifestation of God's will and almighty power, all other responses would, according to them, be vain or even dangerous. In that respect for instance, a year after COP23, on Gau Peter thought that Prime Minister Bainimarama's participation in international arenas, in close collaboration with the Attorney-General Sayed-Khaiyum as the Minister responsible for Climate Change and a key member of the COP23 Presidency team,[8] to try and find worldly solutions to mitigate climate change were useless. According to him indeed, in line with what was

[8] See https://cop23.com.fj/team/minister-responsible-for-climate-change-attorney-general-aiyaz-sayed-khaiyum/ (accessed 29 May 2019). On this page of COP23's official website, Sayed-Khaiyum is described as 'the second-ranking elected official in the country'. The interviewee considered him as 'the boss of everything', Bainimarama being only a 'puppet' under his control.

presented above, the only things that people can do against climate change are to 'seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy', 'seek righteousness', 'seek humility', be 'pure and upright' (Job 8:5 and Zephaniah 2:3).

Through his reading of another set of biblical passages (1 John 2:15–17, Romans 12:2, Jeremiah 17:5–8), Peter also insinuated that not only COP23 was useless, but it might even have contributed to aggravate climate change. Indeed, according to him, COP23 was based on the love of the world, rather than on the love of the Father; it was orchestrated by men who trust in men, rather than by men who trust in the Lord; it revealed worldliness, rather than godliness. God condemns these values conveyed by COP23, and this can have far-reaching consequences.

There is here an interesting parallel with some evangelical iTaukei Christians' criticism of the catchcry that was rapidly given momentum in the wake of Cyclone Winston: 'Stronger than Winston'. For these Christians, this catchcry was 'a hubristic and anthropocentric claim that ignored divine agency and therefore diverted attention from the urgent need to demonstrate a humble disposition toward God through public acts of repentance', and as a consequence could potentially bring another calamity far worse than Cyclone Winston (Cox et al. 2018, 389).

3.4. Prayer as an Ambivalent Response

In Vanuatu, we have not observed any equivalent cases of rejection of worldly responses to climate change. There however, the efficacy of prayer appeared as a clear point of tension between religious and worldly action. Some interviewees considered that prayer was the only avenue open to them, both in the thick of disasters such as Cyclone Pam and as a means of hoping for climate change mitigation by industrial nations. However, some climate action advocates viewed an exclusive focus on prayer as an antithesis to local preparation, for instance:

> Most of the people are Christians and people believe in climate change, that climate change is happening ... And they keep on praying, praying, without doing something which is really actioning, like go plant something to stop coastal erosion and they just keep on praying. (Moses, youth climate activist)

But many interviewees insisted on using prayer as a source of inspiration for practical action, and combining it with tangible worldly acts, such as cutting down the trees nearest the house with the approach of a cyclone. As one interviewee explained, solely engaging in prayer was insufficient, as one could depend on God excessively, and instead it was vital to take self-responsibility.

In other words, prayer can be seen as a vital element of the climate change assemblage even though, depending on the perspective used to assess its local effects, it is not necess- arily recognised as aligning with adaptation measures.

4. Religious Perspectives of Climate Change as a Political Resource

In as much as it tends towards climate apathy or even sometimes a rejection of worldly responses to climate change, this counter-narrative stressing divine agency seems, at first glance, to both disempower and disengage the islanders concerned from community-level climate change adaptation, and thus to undermine local agency. Indeed, in the realm of climate change adaptation, agency is often deemed tantamount to tangible action aiming at environmental or economic adjustments in the face of current or potential physical, climate-related phenomena. However, we contend that there is a need to recognise that

this counter-narrative rather opens the door to unexpected expressions of religiously grounded agency. On the one hand, the Christian perspectives of climate change that we have just presented allow their supporters to point out issues of spiritual and moral corruption and articulate, on this basis, their own vision of a desirable future, focused on Christian and customary values and practices. These perspectives re-embed climate change in a holistic worldview, in which relationships to God, other people and the environment are inseparable, and thus adaptation should be re-enchanted and multifaceted. On the other hand, we will now see that such Christian perspectives can be incorporated in a political praxis (Kempf 2017, 24) aiming to influence an internal or external status quo.

4.1. COP23 Criticism, Partial Blame, and Claims for an iTaukei Christian State

Studies have shown that, in Fiji, the blame for extreme weather events occurring at both the national or local scales tends to be ascribed to specific individuals, groups or entities: dishonest developers, heavy polluters, the tourism industry, the National Weather Office, specific *iTaukei* communities neglecting their land and/or offending God, Prime Minister Bainimarama, and so on (Cox et al. 2018; Nolet 2018). These 'partial blame' narratives (Rudiak-Gould 2015) are sometimes associated with conspiracy theories (Cox et al. 2018, 391; Nolet 2018, 67). As introduced above through the view of COP23 as a kind of profane and therefore vain or potentially dangerous event, in the eyes of some *iTaukei* Christians, such 'partial blame' narratives are also mobilised with respect to climate change, with the government being specifically faulted. Interestingly, for his part, Prime Minister Bainimarama tends to ascribe climate change blame to Australia, the Pacific Island states' traditional development partner, and this can be connected with Fiji's endeavours to exercise an increasing influence within the region (Cox et al. 2018, 400). These divergent blame logics reflect two different visions of what Fiji should be(come): on the one hand, an *iTaukei* Christian state, on the other, 'the Pacific hub in political, economic and sociocultural solidarity' (Mawi 2015, 107). In the 2018 pre-elections context, religious understandings of climate change were mobilised in *iTaukei* discourses supporting the first vision, that is the need to constitutionally make Fiji a Christian state and, thereby, counter the perceived takeover of the country by Muslim and Chinese people. Our point is that, while such claims for an *iTaukei* Christian state are not new, the 2018 elections marked their grafting onto the 'climate change in Oceania' assemblage (whether this connection is temporary or permanent is beyond the scope of this paper).

After the 2000 coup, the Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji (ACCF) was established 'with the vision of creating a Christian state' (Newland 2016, 113), within the context of an alliance between the Methodist Church and smaller evangelical and Pentecostal denominations (Tomlinson 2013b, 82). But the debate on whether Fiji should be constitutionally declared a Christian state was already ongoing (Weir 2015, 167). It was mainly based on the argument that, in the Deed of Cession between the Paramount Fijian chiefs and the British Crown in 1874, both parties agreed that Fiji should officially be a Christian country and made a Holy covenant with God (Ryle 2005). Those in favour of a Christian state argued that, if Fiji was not declared as such, the country would be under a divine curse and suffer divine retribution (Ryle 2005, 70), comparable to the divine wrath unleashed by the breaking of the biblical covenant between God and the Israelites (Cox et al. 2018). Despite this cautionary statement, the 2013 Constitution drawn by a group led by the Attorney-General Sayed-Khaiyum (who is neither a Christian nor an *iTaukei* Fijian) makes Fiji a secular state. Many Christian Fijians therefore considered Cyclone Winston as a divine judgment and punishment for the breaking of the covenant between God and His chosen people, the *iTaukei* Fijians (Cox et al. 2018).

In the context of the 2014 general elections, the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) campaigned against this 2013 Constitution, deemed 'Godless', and supported the ethno-nationalist *iTaukei* vision of a Christian state under the control of *iTaukei* Fijians (Cox et al. 2018; Newland 2016). The call

for an *iTaukei* Christian state was connected with a political critique of the Bainimarama government, in particular of its abrogation of the Great Council of Chiefs, its embrace of Indo-Fijians, and its actions limiting the political influence of Church leaders (Cox et al. 2018, 398). But this call for an *iTaukei* Christian state was also a call against the running of the country by Indo-Fijians such as Sayed-Khaiyum, with some *iTaukei* Fijians commenting that, under his influence, 'the state was becoming Muslim' and 'Fiji's situation could be likened to biblical Israel when Muslims demolished the holy temple of Jerusalem' (Newland 2016, 122). In the context of the 2018 general elections, this view was associated with the rumour that under his influence, Fiji borrowed billions from China, and therefore Kadavu – the fourth biggest Fijian island – had been or was going to be taken by Chinese people.

On this backdrop, the criticism of COP23 documented on Gau island was related to harsh criticism of the government (especially of Bainimarama and Sayed-Khaiyum) in the context of the approaching general elections, and as closely connected with a discourse of the necessity to return to an *iTaukei* Christian state. While this was not explicitly articulated, this criticism of COP23 seemed based on the view that the government, instead of taking over the presidency of COP23, should have repented and endeavoured to re-establish the unique relationship between God and His chosen people, by constitutionally declaring Fiji a Christian state. Moreover, this criticism of COP23 invites us to question the use of this high-level event, in 2018, as a political campaign argument against Bainimarama and Sayed-Khaiyum by the Christian partisans of SODELPA and/or by the Churches instructing people to vote for this party, which was hugely supported on Gau and strengthened its position as the main opposition party with 39.85% of the national votes.

4.2. Blessings, Industrial Blame, and International Climate Activism

By contrast, rather than contesting an internal political status quo, the Vanuatu case study demonstrates how Christian perspectives of climate change can be entangled with claims for greater climate mitigation efforts from industrialised nations, and in particular from Australia as both a major political player at the regional level and one of the biggest fossil-fuel-producing countries at the global level. This entanglement is based on links of trust and association between political figures and civil society actors, rather than on an opposition between the government and part of the country's population as in the Fijian case study. This can be illustrated through following the trajectory of one material actant, a canoe, named 'Ta Reo Vanuatu' or 'The Voice of Vanuatu'.

The construction of Ta Reo Vanuatu in September 2014 in Teoma, a village on Efate island close to Port Vila, was organised by 350 Vanuatu, a national chapter of the international climate advocacy network 350.org and of the regional network 350 Pacific. The canoe was destined for Newcastle Harbor, Australia, the world's largest coal export port, where it would be used to blockade coal barges, thereby taking risky direct action against the fossil fuel industry and highlighting Australia's complicity in the deleterious climate change impacts experienced by Vanuatu. The activists involved – the self-proclaimed 'Pacific Climate Warriors' – orientated around a mode of selective or industrial blame (Rudiak-Gould 2015), holding major polluting nations responsible for climate change. They saw this action and their wider climate advocacy as a form of religious devotion. Their steadfast faith that God would accompany them in their vessels (Fair 2019, 188–189) was bolstered by the blessing of their voyage by a Samoan minister upon the launch of the blockade in Newcastle Harbor, as well as by collective prayers upon the canoe's arrival by all the activists from Vanuatu and other Pacific Island nations assembled in Australia.

Despite being used as a tool for a potentially illegal environmental protest in a foreign jurisdiction, the canoe received both significant government support and formal cultural sanction in Vanuatu. Before its departure, Albert Williams, then Acting Director General of the Vanuatu Ministry of Climate Change,

ceremonially endorsed the canoe. He described the climate activists who would travel with the canoe as 'ambassadors of Vanuatu' carrying the message that Australia needs to better support small island states that are suffering the impacts of climate change (Island Reach 2014). Later, Vanuatu government ministers personally congratulated the activists for the powerful actions they were taking, and reassured them of government support in the (unrealised) eventuality of arrest or deportation. Former Prime Minister Edward Nipake Natapei even excused himself from a conference opening ceremony in order to give his blessing to the canoe and its journey:

> The late Edward Nipake Natapei who just died last month, so he was the one to dedicate the canoe and give a special prayer and give the name Ta Reo Vanuatu and bless the warriors who are travelling with the canoe to Australia and it was a really successful day. (Moses, youth climate activist)

The canoe was also blessed by Chief Kawa Sausiara of Futuna island's Iasoa community, who framed it as a symbol of culture, with climate change representing a severe threat to Ni-Vanuatu culture. Natapei was also from Futuna, so his blessing, along with Chief Kawa's, helps to align the canoe within the tradition of Futunese canoe making, as a key symbol of community cohesion. Meanwhile, as one of the only Vanuatu Prime Ministers to personally attend the COP summits, his endorsement associated this canoe – an advocacy tool of civil society – with international climate negotiations.

At the same time as the canoe was paddled into the shipping lane, hundreds of people, led by senior government ministers, marched through Port Vila in solidarity with the Warriors. Participants bore banners demanding an end to fossil fuel industry expansion and carried taros, yams and banana stumps, representing crops badly affected by changing weather patterns. As the procession reached the lagoon, the government ministers leapt straight into the water, symbolising the rising waters engulfing their islands and threatening both food security and human safety. Some people also jumped in with family pictures, to show that they may lose some of their family members in rising waters: 'it's not just about food, it's also about our life' (quotation from Martha, 350 Vanuatu).

Consequently the canoe reassembles local customary practice for the purpose of international civil disobedience, and forges alignments between youth-led climate advocacy, Christian practices (devotion, blessing, prayer), governmental engagement in global climate negotiations, potentially also governmental endeavours to challenge the current relationships between Australia and Pacific Island states, as well as a revival of *kastom*, food security concerns, and worst-case scenarios of the impacts of climate change. For the people involved throughout this canoe's trajectory, this watercraft becomes all at once a blessed vessel, a symbol of culture and community cohesion, a potential hindrance to Australian coal barges, a climate advocacy tool, a hope for the future of small islands and their youth.

5. Conclusion

Based on the cross-referencing of ethnographic materials collected in Fiji and Vanuatu respectively, this paper analyses three interrelated 'practices of assemblage' (Li 2007) through which the connectedness between Christianity and climate change has taken shape in Oceania. Firstly, *forging alignments*: some faith-based organisations in the Pacific combine their religious mandate with climate change awareness and adaptation injunctions, on the ground through the engagement of local Churches and their leaders as well as partnerships with NGOs, and in relation to global climate negotiations through documents that articulate their legitimacy in this domain. The Bible plays an instrumental role at both these levels, with some of its verses becoming prominent and allowing a double reading: as spiritual, devotion-oriented or as practical, adaptation-oriented guidelines. The concept of assemblage invites us to consider the Bible not as a mere tool mobilised by faith-based organisations to ground and advance their climate advocacy,

but rather as an actant standing on the same ontological level as faith-based organisations (see Kempf 2019). This perspective allows for a focus on the partnership between these two (categories of) actants and the resulting combination of their respective efficacy.

Such partnership and combined efficacy is at the core of the practice of *authorising knowledge*, which is well illustrated by the development of an environmental stewardship narrative that presents all humans as responsible for the care of God's creation, and thus as responsible for combatting and adapting to climate change. In both Fiji and Vanuatu, this narrative coexists with a counter-narrative stating that God controls 'nature' and therefore climate change is 'God's business', and that extreme weather events and climate change are both a chastisement and a message sent by God to encourage spiritual and moral changes in human behaviours.

This practice of *authorising knowledge* appears as closely linked to that of reassembling, as the general environmental stewardship narrative is sometimes combined with the deployment of specific scriptural passages for the new purpose of explaining climate change impacts and encouraging adaptation practices. Faith-based organisations and the Bible are only two of the various actants contributing to the practice of reassembling. In Fiji indeed, the country's Presidency of COP23 and its 2018 elections appear as key players in the grafting of the ongoing Christian state debate to the assemblage. In Vanuatu, the canoe Ta Reo Vanuatu mobilises local customary practice for the purpose of international civil disobedience, and enrolls God in the protest against the Australian coal industry.

Tania Murray Li (2007) has also identified three other 'practices of assemblage' that we have not utilised in this paper, namely *managing failures and contradictions*, *anti-politics*, and *rendering technical*. Regarding the first one, it does not yet appear to be at work in the assemblage at stake, perhaps due to the nascent character of this assemblage. As we have shown, the contradiction between worldly and religious responses to climate change only emerges in specific contexts. If this management labour proves necessary in the future to prevent fracture or disassembling, it might be intricate as it will touch on tensions between various Christian denominations at both the national and local level. Such tensions are not new in Fiji's Christian landscape, and are partly connected with dynamics of opposition vs support towards the government (Tomlinson 2013b) as well as with different histories of involvement in the public realm (Cox et al. 2018, 396). In Vanuatu, further attention on denominational differences is also needed, both in terms of the emphasis different Churches place on worldly and spiritual actions, and their relationships with *kastom*.

As a 'practice of assemblage', *anti-politics* consists of reposing political questions as matters of technique and closing down political debates by reference to expertise (Li 2007). Our case studies illustrate that, on the contrary, in both Fiji and Vanuatu, technical climate change awareness and adaptation questions are reposed as politico-religious matters. Furthermore, political debates – regarding nation-building processes, regional power relations, and international climate governance – are given (new) momentum through the strengthening of the mutual co-constitution of Christianity and the political in the face of climate change.

Likewise, the religious actants of the assemblage we have encountered are not so much involved in the simplification of 'the messiness of the social world' in the form of a diagram 'problem + technical intervention = beneficial result' – that is the practice of *rendering technical* (Li 2007, 265) – as in what can be called the practice of *rendering spiritual*. They indeed emphasise that all the processes that run through the social world have an intrinsic spiritual dimension, and thus that any locally meaningful intervention aiming to deal with the current and projected impacts of climate change must take into account the power and authority of Christianity. Consequently, building upon Li's (2007) existing typology, we proffer

rendering spiritual as a further practice of assemblage. It might be interesting to explore to what extent this practice contributes to hold other assemblages together, in Oceania and beyond, or recraft them when the ground shifts.

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