

*“For ocean protection, we need a radically different understanding of development and recognition of the values of our cultures”*

*A conversation with Rev. James Bhagwan, general secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, on rising sea levels, shrinking habitats in Oceania, forced migration, spirituality and how to survive in community.*

*Cornelia Wilß: Rev. Bhagwan, you have been studying for many years how the climate crisis is changing the habitat and lives of the people in the Pacific Islands. Do you have a personal relationship with the sea?*

Rev. James Bhagwan: Yes, I spend a lot of private time at sea and on the beach. Look, the picture behind me, there you can see, I am an enthusiastic Stand Up Paddler and I am volunteer for the *Fiji Islands traditional voyaging society*. We try to keep the knowledge of traditional Fijian canoe building and navigation in the maritime world alive and pass it on to younger generations. The ocean is a great teacher about timelessness and timeliness and the rhythm in between. “We want to be in fast cars and fast boats; everything is about speed, earning as much as possible as quickly as possible; doing everything at pace”, reflected Colin Philp, president of the society.

Growing up in the Pacific Islands it is hard to not be aware of the issue of climate change. When I was a child, we knew extreme weather patterns such as cyclones and floods, but these would be few and far between. The times of extreme weather conditions have changed. We used to experience hurricanes from November to the end of March. Now we can assume that the season starts in September and lasts until May. There is an increase in extreme weather events like El Nino and La Nina. This cannot be overlooked. When you go to the beach, when you go to the sea with your friends or family at the weekend or on holiday, you can see the consequences of the warming of the sea water, the dying of the corals, with your own eyes. The corals are growing more slowly or are disappearing and we can see much more algae than before. We observe that the condition of sensitive ecosystems such as mangrove forests, seagrass beds and coral reefs has deteriorated in recent years.

As someone who spends a lot of time with the sea, I cannot close my eyes to it.

*What are the consequences of climate change for the lives of the people who depend on the sea?*

Don't you think, like so many Westerners, that we live in a paradise here in Fiji? But let us take a closer look.

The main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu and other larger islands are of volcanic origin, the smaller ones being coral atolls. A coral atoll is created by long-term changes in water levels. Since the coral reef can grow to the surface, an island or a series of islands, often in

the form of an atoll, is formed after the sea level has been lowered or the bottom raised. Both are affected by different ways by climate change.

During the generations that we settled in these places, our houses have gone from traditional houses, which were often made of wood and thatching, to homes made of concrete. As the sea rises, the islands become narrower as the sea starts to eat away the land. On the larger islands you can protect yourself from this and move inland. But if you live on a small atoll island your radius is limited. If you look at the pictures from the air, you can see that the strips of land on which people live are getting narrower. You can't climb a mountain during a storm tide either. Sometimes, when the waves crash over the island, sea water comes into the freshwater reserves and this is of course bad for plant growth and food security.

*Do climate changes mean that people are moving away because living conditions are becoming worse?*

In the Pacific culture, it is customary after the birth of a child to bury the umbilical cord in the earth with a seedling of a tree, sometimes from a coconut palm. This symbolically expresses the strong bond of this person to the land. We as Pacific islanders cannot take ownership of the land in the Western sense of ownership. We consider our identity as being part of the sea, part of the land. In fact, in most traditional Pacific Island cultures, the self does not exist. We exist in community. We exist as part of the natural environment, which is the land, the sea, the sky, and all creation. Our traditional spirituality is a creation-centred spirituality. And now imagine the trauma of forcing a person to leave the land with which they are intertwined and go somewhere else?

*It is the land of the ancestors, right?*

Yes, the ancestors are buried here. How can you leave a place when you are at the age of sixty or seventy and there may be a member of your family buried in that part of the earth? One might compare this to the situation of refugees forced to leave a conflict region. But there is a difference. If the situation in countries like Syria, Afghanistan, has improved at some point, maybe a generation or two later, people can return, theoretically, and build a new life for themselves. But the people of the South Pacific cannot go back to their former places because these places do not exist anymore. The sea has swallowed them. That is why we need to talk about migration caused by climate change.

*More than a third of the world languages are spoken in the Pacific, aren't they? How does cultural diversity affect migration?*

In our area we have a great diversity of languages and cultures in relation to the population. On the larger islands, for example in Papua New Guinea, people in one village speak a completely different language from the neighbouring village, not in the sense of differences in dialects. They are completely different languages. That makes migration more difficult. Maybe the cultures are similar, but not always. The people who live on the low coral islands

naturally have a stronger relationship with the ocean. The people on the larger islands have developed a stronger relationship with the land. If you move persons from an atoll to a volcanic island and if you tell him that they have to climb a mountain inland ... how does that affect their identity, their understanding of the world, their worldview, their spirituality, which influences everything. Even their way of life must change. These cultures are in danger because they could disappear.

*Where do you see the challenges in terms of migration?*

It is a discussion that we know we will have sooner or later. It is better to have it now than to let it become an issue that takes on a life of its own. There are a few important things to consider. First, we must understand that people can suffer a trauma when they are forced leave their homes. The second is the challenge of going to a new place and being accepted by the community there. Not as a guest, not as a refugee, not as a returnee, but as a person who wants to settle there permanently. This is a completely different matter.

For Fiji and the Pacific island states, the ocean is the basis of our livelihood, food security and economy. But we need to address the issue of national borders and certain restrictions within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). If sea levels rise, the rocky islands that mark the EEZs will also disappear. The shrinking size of the country makes them more vulnerable to local fisheries. They lose out. Some countries talk about hosting climate refugees and allowing people to work in their countries, but they link this offer to the condition that they get rights to use our EEZ.

These are complex issues in the context of climate induces migration. That is why we need to consult now. The churches, the civil society, the governments, the UN in terms of International Organization of Migration, IOM, and other UN agencies are working together to create a framework for a preventive action plan.

*How can the fundamental transformation succeed? Has COVID 19 altered something in our minds?*

COVID 19 calls on the international community. What have we learned through COVID? Money, food, all these things are important. But more important is social interaction. More important is spirituality. More important is the family.

On the Fiji Islands, the tourism industry has collapsed. As you know, people in most countries are drawn to urban areas. Now we are seeing a reversal. In the city, you need money for all kinds of things. In the village you grow your own food, you cook and live in your community. We are just becoming aware that our resilience comes from our indigenous knowledge, our indigenous wisdom, our indigenous science, our indigenous way of doing things. We are able to create a kind of harmony between our indigenous way of doing things and the advanced technology of the 21st century. When I was in your country last year, I stated at a number of events that this is one of the advantages we have in the Pacific world.

Although we face climate change, although we see these effects every day, we are resilient people.

*Why? Which path have you taken? What are you doing differently?*

We are taught that if you harvest a plant or a tree, you should directly plant a new one or two. We can see the influence of consumer' culture on us when we think it is better to consume everything today because it will no longer be available tomorrow. This happens as soon as we focus only on the secular aspects of our lives.

In the Pacific world we again find the moment to follow a spiritual path of being deeply connected with the earth. We have recognized the need to protect our oceans and our land, not only to protect our livelihoods, but also to protect what is a part of us. The Blue Economy views the ocean as an economic resource. What is the value of the minerals in the ocean? How much money can I sell them for? But this material value conflicts with two other values: first, the value inherent in the oceans. The ocean is full of life. It is part of the regulating system of the earth's climate. We are beginning to base our arguments on this, and we are beginning to see the effects. We really need to talk more about the stress on the seas. The oceans absorb significant amounts of carbon dioxide and thus swallow up a large proportion of the greenhouse gases released by man. The sea stores more carbon than the atmosphere and the land biosphere. When we talk about 'blue carbon', we mean that the oceans and coastal ecosystems are able of storing large quantities of carbon. The ocean also provides life for you in Germany.

*How can you get this message out to the international community?*

If you look at the climate strikes and the resistance movement around Greta Thunberg and others, they demand the end of neo-liberal capitalism in order to achieve more climate justice. We have to offer alternatives so that we can be heard. In the Pacific region, the churches, the traditional elders, who are the custodians of indigenous knowledge, and thinkers have developed what we call an ecological development framework. Under the terms of COVID 19 we have been working hard on these issues. Our concept places ecology at the centre and, in the long term, means a paradigm shift, a radically different understanding of development and the recognition of the values of our cultures and resources for the development path that lies ahead.

The publication *Ecological-Economic Accounts. Towards intemperate values* written by Arnie Saiki was published in August 2020 puts it in a nutshell:

“COVID-19 offers an opportunity to rethink our development strategy and chart a new and different economic trajectory. The isolation of the Pacific Islands, which has often been stated to be a constraint to development, is actually one of the reasons why of the 12 countries that are COVID-19-free, 10 are from the Pacific Islands. It behooves our leaders and policy makers not only to develop alternative development pathways, perhaps by developing our own economic union, but also to adopt an

ecological approach towards accounting for development. We need to see the whole cost of development, including the retention of our cultural values, social wellbeing and preservation of the quality of the natural environment, and not only the benefits as they contribute to the GDP. It will require courage and a determination to dare to be different, but we in the Pacific Islands are different. Our unique cultural values, traditions, dependency on the natural environment, and the fragility of the environment make it inevitable that we adopt a different perspective on the way we value our development. The call for ecological economic accounting is timely and appropriate. It is an idea and call whose time is actually overdue.” (Source: Ecological-Economic Accounts. Towards intemperate values)

*Rev Bhagwan, the closures imposed by the coronavirus pandemic also led to a slowdown in the economy and lifestyle. To what extent was this slowdown a good thing? You and others talk about a New Normal. What does that mean?*

Yet in the timelessness of the lockdowns, there has been a timely reprioritising of values: more family time, albeit enforced; a return to indigenous traditional practices of food security for those who have lost employment or income; the reintroduction of barter systems in some communities.

In terms of spirituality we have been innovative in our use of appropriate technology, and by promoting home worship we have strengthened family spirituality. New ways of working, connecting and interacting are being used. We have begun to realise what we can do without and what is important to us. Individualism and materialism are waning as relationality and positive traditional values and spirituality are increasing.

The call for visions, to dream and articulate a New Normal, can be seen as a Kairos moment, a nexus where the currents of ‘reweaving the ecological mat,’ ‘rethinking development’ and ‘rethinking the Blue Pacific’ meet the winds of a global pandemic, a growing movement to rethink capitalism and materialism in response to the climate crisis, and the call for ecological conversion in response to the widespread destruction of this planet’s ecosystem.

*Thank you for your time!*

Sources:

Personal Interview mit Rev. James Bhagwan (Zoom, Oct 22, 2020)

*Reweaving the Ecological Mat Framework: Toward an Ecological Framework for Development*, is part of the Reweaving the Ecological Mat (REM) initiative jointly implemented by the Pacific Theological College (PTC), the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), and the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies (OCACPS) of the University of the South Pacific (USP) since 2017.

[https://issuu.com/wordsbydesign/docs/reweaving\\_the\\_ecological\\_mat\\_framework\\_\\_final\\_\\_web](https://issuu.com/wordsbydesign/docs/reweaving_the_ecological_mat_framework__final__web)

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