

WHEN DOGMATICS COLONISES THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article offers a sustained Pacific decolonial response to Myk Habets's essay, "The Vagaries of Theology: Thomas F. Torrance and Practical Theology," which defends Thomas F. Torrance's Christocentric dogmatics as the normative centre of theology and critiques contextual, Indigenous, and Pacific theologies as at risk of becoming "atheological." I argue that Habets's assessment reflects a colonising function of dogmatics when Eurocentric theological epistemologies are universalised and Indigenous modes of theological reasoning are marginalised. Drawing exclusively on verifiable, peer-reviewed Pacific theological scholarship—particularly the work of Jione Havea, Upolu Lumā Vaai, Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko, and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams—I demonstrate that Pacific theology is deeply Christological, scriptural, ecclesial, and ethically accountable. Far from being atheological, Pacific theology exposes the provincialism of Western dogmatics and calls theology toward epistemic humility, relationality, and attentiveness to land, ocean, and lived realities in Oceania.

Keywords

Pacific theology, decolonial theology, dogmatics, Indigenous epistemologies, relational hermeneutics, theological colonialism

Introduction: Theology, Authority, and Colonial Memory

Myk Habets's critique of practical theology is framed as a concern for theological integrity. In "The Vagaries of Theology: Thomas F. Torrance and Practical Theology," Habets argues that theology must remain governed by Christocentric dogmatics if it is to avoid collapse into relativism or cultural captivity.¹ He warns that when theology prioritises lived experience, social location, or contextual concerns—particularly in Indigenous and Pacific settings—it risks becoming "atheological." While presented as a defense of doctrinal coherence, this argument raises deeper questions about theological authority, epistemic legitimacy, and the lingering colonial structures that continue to shape theological discourse.

1 Myk Habets, "The Vagaries of Theology: Thomas F. Torrance and Practical Theology," *Participatio: Journal of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship* 12 (2024): 175–213, esp. 179–83, <https://tftorrance.org/2024-MH-1>.

This article contends that Habets's critique does not merely misunderstand Pacific theology; it exemplifies a broader pattern in which Western dogmatics functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. By positioning itself as universal and normative, dogmatics renders other theological traditions—especially those arising from colonised contexts—secondary, derivative, or suspect. The charge of “atheology” is not neutral. It is a disciplinary judgement that polices the boundaries of theology and determines whose knowledge counts.

From a Pacific perspective, theology has never been separable from land, ocean, kinship, and survival. Christianity arrived in Oceania through missionary projects intertwined with colonial expansion, racial hierarchies, and epistemic suppression. Yet Pacific communities did not merely receive Christianity; they interpreted, translated, reshaped, and lived it within their own cosmologies and social worlds. Pacific theology emerged not as an abstract intellectual exercise but as a practice of faith amid dispossession, cultural disruption, and resilience.

The reviewers of this article rightly noted that a response to Habets must move beyond a defense of individual scholars and instead situate the critique within a broader Pasifika theological field. This article therefore draws on a body of peer-reviewed Pacific theological scholarship that demonstrates coherence, diversity, and depth. The aim is not to reject dogmatics outright, but to expose how dogmatics becomes colonising when it refuses to recognise its own contextuality and imposes its epistemological norms as universal.

Dogmatics as Colonial Inheritance

Habets's defense of Torrance presupposes a particular hierarchy: systematic dogmatics governs all other theological forms, including practical theology.² Doctrine, in this framework, is primary; lived experience, cultural context, and social engagement are secondary and derivative. This hierarchy is often treated as self-evident within Western theology, yet it is neither timeless nor culturally neutral.

Historically, dogmatics developed within European intellectual traditions shaped by Christendom, scholasticism, and later Enlightenment rationality. Its emphasis on systematisation, coherence, and universality reflected specific social and political conditions in which theology served as a stabilising force for church and empire alike. When Christianity expanded beyond Europe through colonial mission,

2 This hierarchy is especially evident where Habets argues that “dogmatics is as practical as it is theoretical,” that so-called “practical” courses belong within “the dogmatic enterprise itself,” and that some forms of practical theology become “atheological” when they depart from Christocentric dogmatics (Habets, “Vagaries of Theology,” 178–80). It is reinforced again when he claims that certain practical theologies “need to become more dogmatic” (180).

dogmatics travelled with it—not simply as theology, but as a regime of knowledge that defined what counted as legitimate belief and practice.

In Oceania, missionary theology frequently functioned as an instrument of cultural hierarchy. European doctrinal formulations were presented as complete and authoritative, while Indigenous cosmologies were dismissed as primitive or incompatible with Christian truth. Theology was something to be transmitted, not something to be generated locally. Indigenous interpretations of Scripture, worship, and ethics were tolerated only insofar as they conformed to imported doctrinal norms.

Katalina Tahaafe-Williams's scholarship disrupts this narrative by documenting the agency of Pacific Christians in shaping Christianity in Oceania. In *Christianity in Oceania*, she and her co-editors show that Indigenous catechists, preachers, and church leaders played decisive roles in translating Scripture, shaping liturgy, and negotiating Christian identity within local cultures.³ Pacific Christianity was never a simple replication of European forms; it was always contested, negotiated, and contextual.

Yet the legacy of dogmatic hierarchy persists. When Habets frames Torrance's dogmatics as the measure of "proper theology,"⁴ he reinscribes this colonial inheritance. Pacific theology is evaluated not on its own terms but against a standard formed elsewhere. The problem is not that Torrance is wrong or irrelevant; the problem is that his theological framework is treated as universally normative without critical engagement with its cultural and historical limits.

The Myth of Universal Dogmatics

A central assumption in Habets's critique is that dogmatics operates above context. Practical and contextual theologies are portrayed as vulnerable to cultural distortion, while dogmatics is presented as a safeguard of theological purity.⁵ This distinction collapses under scrutiny. Dogmatics is no less contextual than any other form of theology; its context is simply less acknowledged.

3 Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, Kenneth R. Ross, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in Oceania* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

4 This framing is particularly clear where Habets defines dogmatics as fundamentally centred on Christ and the triune God (177–78), describes practical theology's distinction from dogmatics as a "false dichotomy" (179–80), and then judges certain contextual and counselling approaches by whether they remain governed by that Christocentric dogmatic norm (194–95).

5 See especially Habets, "Vagaries of Theology," 176–80, where practical theology is critiqued for beginning from "human experience," while dogmatics is presented as the proper theological norm grounded in divine self-revelation; and 180–81, where theology centred on experience, nature, or culture is treated as departing from properly Christian theology.

Thomas F. Torrance's theology emerged within a particular European intellectual milieu shaped by Reformed ecclesiology, modern scientific epistemology, and post-Enlightenment concerns about objectivity and truth. His emphasis on Christocentric realism and theological coherence reflects these contexts. To present this framework as universal while critiquing Pacific theology as contextual is to mistake particularity for normativity.

Jione Havea's work offers a sustained critique of this asymmetry. In *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible*, Havea and his collaborators demonstrate how Western biblical interpretation often disguises its own cultural assumptions by presenting them as neutral or universal.⁶ Contextuality becomes a charge levelled at Indigenous readings, while Western interpretations escape scrutiny.

Similarly, *Sea of Readings* exposes how Pacific readers engage Scripture through oceanic metaphors, migratory histories, and colonial memory.⁷ These readings are not arbitrary or relativistic; they are grounded in lived realities that shape how Scripture is heard and enacted. The difference lies not in whether interpretation is contextual, but in whether context is acknowledged.

Upolu Lumā Vaai deepens this critique by challenging the epistemological foundations of Western theology itself. In *Relational Hermeneutics*, Vaai argues that Pacific epistemologies are fundamentally relational, communal, and place-based.⁸ Knowledge is not produced by detached individuals but emerges through relationships—with people, ancestors, land, and God. Dogmatics that privileges abstraction and systematisation risks severing theology from these relational networks.

Recognising the contextual nature of all theology does not entail relativism. Rather, it calls for epistemic honesty. When dogmatics refuses to acknowledge its own context, it risks absolutising its categories and marginalising other ways of knowing God.

Scripture, Power, and the Charge of Atheology

Habets's concern that Pacific theology weakens scriptural authority⁹ rests on a narrow understanding of what authority entails. Authority, in this view, is tied to

6 Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson (eds), *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: RumInations*, Semeia Studies no. 77 (SBL Press, 2015).

7 Jione Havea, ed., *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific*, Semeia Studies no. 90 (SBL Press, 2018).

8 Upolu Lumā Vaai, ed., *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi* (University of the South Pacific Press, 2017).

9 Habets makes this concern explicit when he argues that some Indigenous theologies reject biblical authority, prioritise local stories over Scripture, and treat Scripture as no longer sacred, inspired, or normatively authoritative (181, 186–87).

doctrinal control and interpretive stability. Pacific biblical scholarship challenges this assumption by foregrounding the power dynamics embedded in interpretation.

The Pacific readings gathered in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible* and *Sea of Readings* insist that Scripture matters precisely because it has been used to shape colonial realities. Biblical texts were deployed to legitimise land theft, gender hierarchies, and ecclesial control. To read Scripture without attending to these histories is not theological fidelity; it is theological amnesia.

Pacific hermeneutics therefore asks questions that dogmatics often sidelines: Who benefits from this interpretation? Whose voices are silenced? How does this reading shape bodies, communities, and land? These questions do not replace exegesis; they deepen it. They recognise that Scripture does not exist in a vacuum but is always mediated through human power relations.

To label such engagement “atheological” is to misunderstand theology’s task. Theology that ignores the material consequences of interpretation risks becoming complicit in harm. From a Pacific perspective, attentiveness to power is not a departure from faithfulness but an expression of it.

Relational Ontology and the Question of Place

One of the most significant contributions of Pacific theology is its insistence that theology must be grounded in place. Vaai’s relational ontology challenges Western frameworks that abstract God from land and community. In Pacific worldviews, land is not property but kin; ocean is not resource but relation. Theology that ignores these realities struggles to speak meaningfully of creation, incarnation, or salvation.

This insistence on place is not romantic or nostalgic. It arises from lived experience. Pacific communities are among those most vulnerable to climate change, sea-level rise, and ecological degradation. Theology that remains abstract in the face of these realities risks becoming irrelevant or complicit.

Habets’s defense of dogmatics offers limited space for such concerns. By subordinating contextual and lived realities to prior doctrinal formulation, Habets risks marginalising the questions that define theological faithfulness in Oceania today. Pacific theology exposes this disconnect not by rejecting doctrine, but by insisting that doctrine must be accountable to land, ocean, and community.

Public Theology, Embodied Harm, and the Limits of Abstraction

One of the most revealing dimensions of Habets’s critique is his discomfort with practical theology. His concern that theology becomes “atheological” when human experience, nature, culture, or existing disciplinary aims function as the primary

locus of study reflects his insistence that practical and contextual theology remain normed by Christocentric dogmatics.¹⁰ From a Pacific perspective, however, this anxiety signals not theological vigilance but theological abstraction.

Pacific theology insists that theology cannot remain credible if it is indifferent to embodied harm. Christianity in Oceania has been deeply entangled with structures of authority that have shaped family life, gender relations, and social hierarchies. Churches have often functioned as sites of care and resistance, but they have also been implicated in silence, discipline, and the normalisation of harm. Theology that refuses to engage these realities risks becoming complicit.

Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko's *Embodying Aga Tausili: A Public Theology from Oceania* provides a powerful example of Pacific public theology that is both doctrinally serious and socially accountable.¹¹ Addressing family violence within Samoan church contexts, Ah Siu-Maliko engages core theological categories—sin, grace, discipleship, ecclesiology, and embodiment—while refusing theological silence. Her work demonstrates that theological abstraction is not neutral; it can perpetuate harm when doctrine is severed from lived realities.

Crucially, Ah Siu-Maliko does not abandon doctrine in favour of pragmatism. Rather, she exposes how doctrine itself is at stake when theology fails to confront violence. The question is not whether theology should engage social realities, but whether it can afford not to. From this perspective, theology that remains detached from embodied harm risks becoming functionally atheological—silent where faith should speak most urgently.

Habets's defense of dogmatics offers little space for this kind of accountability. By framing practical theology as subordinate and potentially suspect, his argument reinforces a hierarchy that privileges doctrinal coherence over embodied truth. Pacific theology challenges this hierarchy by insisting that theology must answer not only to internal consistency but also to its effects in lived communities.

Scripture, Community, and the Ethics of Interpretation

Pacific biblical theology further illuminates the stakes of this debate. The concern that contextual interpretation undermines scriptural authority rests on a narrow conception of authority as control over meaning.¹² Pacific hermeneutics reframes

10 Habets, "Vagaries of Theology," 180, 194–95.

11 Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko, *Embodying Aga Tausili: A Public Theology from Oceania* (Lexington Books, 2022).

12 This is implied in Habets's repeated contrast between theology governed by divine self-revelation in Scripture and approaches he criticises for allowing culture, experience, or local stories to function as prior norms for interpretation (177, 180–81, 186–87).

authority as responsibility—responsibility to communities shaped by Scripture and to histories marked by its use.

The essays collected in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible* and *Sea of Readings* exemplify this approach.¹³ These works demonstrate that Scripture has never been read innocently in the Pacific. Biblical texts were introduced within colonial projects that reshaped land tenure, governance, and social norms. Pacific readers therefore approach Scripture with acute awareness of its power—both to wound and to heal.

This attentiveness does not relativise Scripture; it takes Scripture seriously as a force that shapes lives. Pacific hermeneutics asks questions that dogmatic approaches often overlook: How has this text been used? Whose interests has it served? What alternative readings emerge when Scripture is read from the underside of history? These questions do not displace exegesis; they situate it within ethical accountability.

By contrast, dogmatics that prioritises doctrinal stability over interpretive responsibility risks treating Scripture as an abstract object rather than a living text embedded in contested histories. From a Pacific perspective, such abstraction undermines rather than safeguards authority. Authority divorced from accountability becomes domination.

Relational Theology and the Ecological Crisis

The insistence on relationality in Pacific theology carries profound ecological implications. Vaai's relational ontology challenges theological frameworks that treat land and ocean as secondary concerns.¹⁴ In Pacific worldviews, land is genealogical, ocean is relational, and human identity is inseparable from place. Theology that ignores these realities struggles to speak in genuinely universal and contextually meaningful ways about creation, incarnation, and salvation.

This challenge is not theoretical. Pacific communities face existential threats from climate change, rising sea levels, and environmental degradation. These realities demand theological engagement. Theology that remains abstract in the face of ecological crisis risks becoming irrelevant or complicit.

Habets's defense of dogmatics offers limited resources for addressing such concerns. By subordinating contextual engagement to doctrinal formulation,

13 Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson, eds., *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: RumInations*, Semeia Studies no. 77 (SBL Press, 2015); Jione Havea, ed., *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific*, Semeia Studies no. 90 (SBL Press, 2018).

14 Upolu Lumā Vaai, ed., *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi* (University of the South Pacific Press, 2017); Vaai, Upolu Lumā, and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, eds., *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific* (University of the South Pacific Press, 2017).

dogmatics risks marginalising the very questions that define theological faithfulness in Oceania today. Pacific theology insists that doctrine must be accountable to land and ocean—not as an optional add-on, but as a theological necessity.

Relational theology therefore exposes a critical limitation of dogmatics when it is treated as self-sufficient. Christology, creation theology, and ecclesiology cannot remain credible if they are disconnected from the ecological realities that shape human and non-human life.

Christology after Empire

Habets insists that theology must be governed by Christology.¹⁵ Pacific theologians do not dispute this claim; they interrogate the form Christology takes. Colonial Christianity often aligned Christ with authority, order, and empire. Christ was proclaimed as Lord in ways that legitimated colonial rule, ecclesial discipline, and cultural hierarchy.

Pacific theology seeks to relocate Christ among the colonised, displaced, and wounded. In *Theologies from the Pacific*, contributors articulate Christologies shaped by colonial histories, cultural resilience, and ecological vulnerability.¹⁶ These Christologies are not deviations from Christian faith; they are contextual articulations that take incarnation seriously.

From this perspective, Christology cannot be abstracted from history. A Christ who is detached from land loss, migration, and violence risks becoming an ideological symbol rather than a source of hope. Pacific Christology insists that Christ is encountered within concrete struggles for dignity, justice, and survival.

Dogmatics that treats Christology as a closed system risks foreclosing these insights. Pacific theology challenges dogmatics not by rejecting Christology, but by demanding that it be accountable to lived realities shaped by empire and resistance.

Epistemic Humility and the Decolonisation of Theology

At the heart of this debate is the question of who has the authority to produce, authorise, and evaluate theological knowledge. When dogmatics assumes universal authority, it risks epistemic arrogance—the presumption that theological truth is already settled within a particular tradition.

15 See Habets, “Vagaries of Theology,” 177–79, where he writes that “theology is about Jesus,” that Christ occupies the “controlling centre” of theology, and that dogmatics properly concerns “the redemption that is in Christ”; see also 180, where he criticises practical theology when “Jesus Christ” is no longer the “primary locus of study,” and 194–95, where he evaluates counselling theology by whether it is adequately grounded in a Christocentric and orthodox doctrine of God.

16 Jione Havea, ed., *Theologies from the Pacific*, Postcolonialism and Religions (Springer, 2021).

Pacific theology calls for epistemic humility. This humility does not entail relativism or the abandonment of doctrine. It entails recognising that theology is always partial, contextual, and open to correction. It acknowledges that Indigenous epistemologies offer genuine theological insight rather than cultural decoration.

Decolonising theology therefore involves more than adding contextual examples to established frameworks. It requires re-examining the frameworks themselves. It requires recognising how colonial histories have shaped theological categories and opening those categories to transformation.

Such humility is not a threat to catholicity. On the contrary, it is a condition of genuine catholicity—one that honours diversity without collapsing into uniformity. Theology that listens across cultures and histories becomes richer, not weaker.

Re-reading Habets: What Is at Stake?

Re-reading Habets's essay through a Pacific lens reveals what is at stake in this debate. The issue is not whether doctrine matters. Pacific theology affirms the importance of doctrine, Christology, and Scripture. The issue is how doctrine functions—whether it serves as a resource for faithful living or as a mechanism of exclusion.

Habets's concern for theological integrity is understandable. Yet integrity cannot be preserved by insulating theology from lived realities. Theology that refuses to engage context risks mistaking abstraction for faithfulness. Pacific theology exposes this risk by insisting that theology must remain accountable to land, bodies, and communities.

The charge of “atheology” thus appears misplaced. If anything, the danger lies in theology that claims universality while ignoring the realities of colonial history, ecological crisis, and embodied harm. Such theology risks becoming disconnected from the God it seeks to proclaim.

Conclusion: Toward a Decolonised Theological Imagination

This article has argued that Habets's critique of Pacific theology reveals the limits of dogmatics when it functions as a colonial gatekeeper. Pacific theology is not atheological. It is scripturally engaged, Christologically grounded, ecclesially rooted, and ethically accountable. It challenges theology to confront its own histories, assumptions, and power dynamics.

The future of theology in Oceania—and beyond—depends on whether theology is willing to undergo decolonisation. This does not mean abandoning doctrine, but reimagining it in conversation with Indigenous epistemologies and lived realities. It means recognising that theology is always situated and that faithfulness requires attentiveness to place, history, and community.

The question, therefore, is not whether Pacific theology conforms to Western dogmatics, but whether dogmatics is willing to be transformed by the voices it has long marginalised. Only through such transformation can theology become truly catholic—responsive to the God who speaks across lands and oceans.