

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Engaging with Joanna Leidenhag's *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*

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### Abstract

This article appreciatively reviews Joanna Leidenhag's work *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* while also responding critically to some aspects of Leidenhag's approach and content. The authors acknowledge several strengths of Leidenhag's work, then turn to how a panpsychic framework comports with Christa L. McKirland's recent work in theological anthropology. Finally, Eugene Fuimaono proposes areas of expansion for Leidenhag to consider – specifically as this relates to the value of engaging indigenous perspectives.

### Introduction

Joanna Leidenhag's *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* seeks to reclaim an ontological framework that has been a minority view in the Western philosophical tradition. This framework is called panpsychism and 'is a family of theories within philosophy of mind, which seek to explain the existence of consciousness in the human person by positing mentality ("psyche") as fundamental throughout the natural world ("pan")' (1). She then weaves this framework together with Christian theism proposing 'What panpsychism uniquely provides is an ontological "space" for the personal and interactive presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling the depths of creaturely subjectivity and calling all creatures toward flourishing' (5). As such, she concludes with a theistic panpsychism that is better equipped to coherently engage with divine action and eco-theology. In other words, by understanding God's action and presence in all creation, one can better mind, or care for, all of creation.

In this review, we will briefly acknowledge some of the strengths of Leidenhag's work, then turn to how a panpsychic framework comports with Christa McKirland's (2022) recent work in theological anthropology, and finally consider areas for expansion by Eugene Fuimaono – specifically as this relates to the value of engaging indigenous perspectives.

### Strengths of Leidenhag's work

Leidenhag is to be commended for her ecumenical efforts whereby she proposes a minimalistic panpsychist framework that could be compatible with any number of views on the doctrine of God, as well as different models of divine intervention (4–5). Further,

her framework is not aiming to be a complete theory of reality, but to give an account of the 'nature and place of mentality within the cosmos' (1). She exemplifies bridge-building while also being clear about what views are incompatible with her own, such as reductive materialism or emergent dualism.

Leidenhag is also clear on her logical priority of doctrine. She stresses the doctrine of creation and its relation to consciousness as the seedbed for theological anthropology: 'in order for human beings to be conscious, the basic ingredients of mentality have to exist throughout the universe as a fundamental feature of reality' (3). Such framing strengthens her ethical implications of de-centring humanity as the apex of all creation (150). Humans are only a part of the creation, and it is the creator/creature distinction that is the controlling grammar of her project. As such, *creatio ex nihilo* flows out of this distinction but not at the expense of God's radical immanence. This is a corrective, she argues, that panpsychism offers to Christian theology. The absolute otherness of God does not come at the expense of intimacy with and valuing of the created order (136).

While these strengths (and there are many more) of Leidenhag's work are valuable to Christian theologians of any persuasion to consider, we found her work to be especially important to theological anthropology. Another recent work in this sub-field by Christa McKirland (2022) is consistent with the framework proposed in *Minding Creation* and, in some cases, would be strengthened by adopting Leidenhag's proposal.

### Overlap with God's Provision, Humanity's Need: The Gift of our Dependence

While there are many points of overlap with Leidenhag's work with my (Christa L. McKirland) own, three will be reflected on here: the distinction between the need to exist and the need to flourish; the ontological continuity of all things; and the uniqueness of humankind without reifying the idea of human supremacy over the rest of creation (McKirland (2022)).

In my own work, I argue for creaturely dependence upon God for existence, which is itself a gift, but which is also distinct from the creature's agential dependence upon God that contributes to flourishing. Consequently, I found resonance with Leidenhag when she explains that 'Christian theology offers a transcendental horizon, where creation can be understood as gift, not only of being but the gift of fellowship with God and other creatures' (148).<sup>1</sup> Earlier in her argument, she engages with Leibniz to make a similar point in that 'Primary causation is each monad's dependency on God for continued existence; secondary causation is the actions and forces which come from within the monad which God sustains' (97). On my understanding, the primary causation would map onto the gift of existence while the secondary causation would map onto the gift of flourishing as the creature co-operates with the work of God's Spirit. Such co-operation is understood as 'double agency' (97).

Paralleling my account, humans are intended to have a particular form of relationship with God, which is also a gift that contributes to their flourishing. While my own work focuses on humankind, Leidenhag's ontological framework within the doctrine of creation provides a larger genus within which my theological anthropology is a species. As such, the values of her framework find overlap with a theological anthropology of creaturely need. Further, because the need to exist and, subsequently, to flourish are both dependent upon God and shared by all creatures, there is a natural continuity across all contingent beings. Such a continuity is also found in Leibniz in that all creation has a glory-to-God reflecting capacity as 'It is not only the intellectual rationality of the human mind that brings glory to God, but the basic property of experience across the universe as well' (96). While humans have some unique ways of expressing this capacity, humankind cannot claim a corner-market on the capacity itself. By establishing a distinction between the

need to exist and the need to flourish this maintains both the continuity between humankind and the rest of creation as well as the discontinuity.

The continuity comes from sharing creatureliness and the glory-to-God reflecting capacity. Such a continuity 'enables theologians to realistically interpret neglected aspects of the biblical witness and church's liturgy, such that creation is a responsive community made to praise the Triune God' (5). Such an account recognizes creation's possibility to give glory to God while also reckoning with its broken reality, so even though sin distorts creation, all creatures have the 'capacity to experience God's Spirit in their own way. . . . It may not be a rational knowledge of God as humans grapple for, but panpsychism can suggest that every creature may feel God's presence as a pull towards God's Kingdom' (129–130). God desires all creation to flourish and is drawing every creature to Godself.

However, while such continuity exists, this does not then flatten all distinctions among the many kinds of creatures that there are, especially humankind, which is distinctively made in God's image and the only creature God has chosen to incarnate as (as far as we know). This discontinuity is carefully articulated in Leidenhag's chapter on eco-theology as 'Humanity's vocation in the community may still be one of leadership (priesthood or guardianship) since this is congruent with the higher-order complexity of mind that humans possess, but this is a difference of degree and not an absolute difference of kind' (168). So, while humanity 'should not have a monopoly on a living relationship with the Creator' as this is not an all-or-nothing enterprise, such an assertion does not undermine human uniqueness (145, 151). Instead, we need to 'rehabilitate the priestly and stewarding roles of humanity' (160). She suggests a vocation in which 'humanity does not manage or control a material holding but is given temporary guardianship over God's non-human children, to care and raise them to flourish' (168). Thus, continuity with distinction enables humans to embrace their unique vocation without instrumentalizing creation.

In my own work, the importance of the priestly vocation is to be a steward of the divine presence in the created world. Part of the human glory-to-God reflecting capacity is by living into the God-given vocation of caring for the created world – not as lords over it but as caregivers who are part of it. All creation has a need to be in a dependence relationship with God for existence, but this is simply how being created works. What is additional, and what panpsychism endorses, is that all creation also has a possible responsiveness to God's presence, and in fact, needs to respond (in some way) to God's presence in order to flourish. While my own work has focused on this need to respond in the human person, Leidenhag helpfully expands this vision to all of creation. Such an expansion is a needed corrective, especially in a Western context. Given this context, however, we would like to proffer a further expansion of Leidenhag's work for her consideration.

### Areas of expansion for consideration

Leidenhag's work has done something quite marvellous – expanding the Western mindset regarding theological creation care and the status of creation from within the constructs and constraints of the Western scientific, philosophical, and theological academy. The main consideration to further this expansion, and something Leidenhag mentions, is to engage the perspectives of indigenous theologians, specifically, those who have reconsidered Christianity from an indigenous position (59–61). The body of indigenous theological scholarship is rich and would add much to the discussion Leidenhag has reinvigorated, regarding not only panpsychism but also the wider concepts McKirland has discussed.<sup>2</sup> Given my (Eugene Fuimaono) own positionality as an Aotearoa indigene (Māori) and theological scholar, I believe that panpsychism is not necessarily wholly transferable into indigenous thought. However, in the area of theological academia it is an exciting proposal as

it finds promising points of congruency with Māori theology and provides scientific foundation for a key question posed in indigenous theological conversations – if the Creator and creature are distinct, what is the glue that binds it all together?

Leidenhag states that ‘It is widely understood that Eastern philosophy is almost universally panpsychist’ (11 n. 42). The admission that other cultures have already adopted this framework could also include other cultures of the Pacific. Although not necessarily panpsychist in a formal sense – a metaphysical framework similar to panpsychism seems consistent for Moana<sup>3</sup> theologians as a pre-colonial thought system, even if it is different in practice (Marsden and Royal (2003)). To be more specific, concepts regarding the creature/creation distinction (6, 136), relational stewardship as opposed to resource stewardship regarding creation (168), the priesthood of humanity (149–156), the fundamentality of mind such that ‘creation is a cosmos full of experience, open to God’s presence, and responsive in giving God glory’ (174), and the de-centring of humanity (149, 164–169) are all things with which Moana theologians would find some agreement. Where there would be disagreement stems from the Western foundations, conceptions, and assumptions enlisted in order to make the argument for panpsychism.

For instance, Leidenhag refers to the ‘Incredulous Stare’ in her section on ‘contemporary objections to panpsychism’ (60). The force of this objection hinges upon the persisting core of Whiteness in Western theological academy. Whiteness, in the sense of Willie Jennings’s use of the term, is that the goal of the theological academy (which is the source of most of the Western academy) has always been the formation of White, self-sufficient males, and therefore handily disregards any modes of thought that are deemed ‘other’. Whiteness is an adjective about race but also about a cultural objective: the elevation of Western modes of thought and the assimilation of foreign bodies and minds to this way of knowing (Jennings (2012)). As this relates to the incredulous stare objection: we stare at what is foreign to us. However, if panpsychism maps onto one’s intuitions, there is no need to stare. The problem is panpsychism does not map onto *Western* intuitions. For instance, for many Moana theologians, the idea that all things possess mentality is not incredulous. However, instead of addressing the incredulous stare at the level of epistemology, Leidenhag addresses this at the level of ontology. She explains that mentality can be found in either a unified or ‘non-unified form, which we should *not expect to see signs of* at the level of a rock’ (62). The unified/non-unified mentality distinction deftly side-steps the stare from a safely Western position, but it does not question the epistemological assumptions that also need to be interrogated. Indigeneity is familiar with the incredulous stare, but unlike in Leidenhag’s chapter, the ‘stare’ has always been sufficient to disregard indigenous perspectives regarding the connectedness of all things, especially concerning theology (Smith (2012)).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is time to stare back.

However, regarding ontology, this presents another area of disagreement for panpsychism conceived on Western terms. From a Māori and, more broadly, a Moana perspective, this arises with the lack of ‘spirit’ on this account of panpsychism. To find correlation between mentality and Māori concepts, Hirini Mead talks about states of *mauri* – the Māori concept of the binding source of creation,<sup>5</sup> and its two states – *mauri oho* and *mauri tau* – activity and passivity (Mead (2016)). These states are similar to Leidenhag’s unified and non-unified states of mentality. The difference, however, is what is being bound. For Leidenhag, it is the binding of creations to each other through the similar possession of mentality, creating a bond through essential similarity and consequential functional responsibility (129).

For Māori, it is the binding first of the unseen spiritual and seen physical, and second, through lineage, the binding of creation to creation and inherently to the Creator through *whakapapa*, a detailed lineage account of creation (Marsden and Royal (2003)). Thus, mentality, in a Māori framework, is sufficient for conversing about the unseen quality of

creation. However, it is incomplete in its application to indigenous frameworks and would benefit from the addition and application of spirit and lineage. However, the addition of spirit for indigenous frameworks undoubtedly raises questions about animism, which has been historically rejected in Western theology.

This leads me to my final point: does one need to reject animism and replace it with panpsychism? Leidenhag claims that panpsychism offers a satisfactory alternative to animism (139). Unfortunately, 'animism' has historically been used as a denigrating generalization of indigenous spiritual practices from Western observers in order to be dismissed entirely (Smith (2012)). While I do not think this is what Leidenhag is doing, in order to avoid this interpretation, Leidenhag could engage more explicitly with animism and also the indigenous thought worlds for which 'animism' has become a catch-phrase. In doing so, she may find there is no real need for an alternative to animism but simply a better understanding of indigenous ways of thinking. Further, by finding how her views overlap with certain aspects of indigenous thought, she will discover other voices who will help deepen and sharpen her thinking. At the same time, what Leidenhag is providing is an important move forward for indigenous-Western/colonial conversations. Panpsychism offers English language speakers a more accessible portal into indigenous modes of thought that appear uncomfortably animistic into more readily acceptable concepts. Indigeneity also offers the next step for panpsychism – how to integrate and understand spirit as part of the creature/creation narrative, and ancient ways of knowledge for outworking *kaitiakitanga*: our caretaking priestly familial responsibility as our function towards all creation as representations of the Creator.

## Conclusion

We are grateful for Leidenhag's work as a philosopher, theologian, and bridge-builder. Her desire to do heavy conceptual lifting in a way that matters for how we live is to be commended. In light of that desire, we believe her work could be helpfully expanded by engaging with voices beyond her Western context to help her in the task of both examining epistemic foundations and building bridges with other thought worlds. We hope that more theologians, especially, will read her work and be challenged to think more cosmically about God's immanent presence and the ethical consequences for how we might live in such a cosmos.

## Notes

1. In her summary of chapter 4 at the beginning of chapter 5, she explains: 'I concluded with a model of the inner presence of the Holy Spirit as calling all creatures into greater union with God' (139). The fact that the union is something that can be experienced to greater and lesser degrees is indicative of it being something in addition to existence. Further, the degreed nature of what can be experienced is because 'A world in which mind is a fundamental property found throughout creation is a cosmos full of experience, open to God's presence, and responsive in giving God glory' (174).
2. Some examples of Māori theologians are Wayne Te Kaawa, Byron Rangiwai, Māori Marsden, Pā Henare Tate, and Manuka Henare.
3. Those of us indigenously located in the Pacific Ocean.
4. Smith (2012) states that indigenous peoples as the 'objects' of research have no voice and are 'correctly' defined by those in the 'superior' position – the analyst being the imperial scientist. This is an attitude that although it has been changing persists doggedly in academic circles in Aotearoa, exemplified in the attached article concerning Auckland university professors claiming Māori knowledge is not science. Available at <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korih/447898/university-academics-claim-matauranga-maori-not-science-sparks-controversy>.
5. The crudest translation being that of 'life-essence' but still being woefully inadequate, missing all of the prerequisite knowledge and nuance from a Māori worldview.

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