

Telescopes, Sacred Spaces, and Mauna Kea

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Thank you for the invitation to offer thoughts on the controversy over telescopes on Mauna Kea. Just to clarify, I am not here tonight to try and be a mediator. I think our goal in these forums is to share ideas and improve our mutual clarity and insight, not to try and converge everyone's views into an immediate solution. Perhaps you will find a way to do that, but that is not my purpose as a speaker.

Having shot my mouth off in an editorial about some of the ways native culture and science can sometimes co-exist,¹ I was asked to speak about sacred spaces, places, and objects but I also want to connect these ideas to leadership and the kind of dialogue that might be both constructive and productive at this sensitive moment. I am no expert on religion and sacredness but I have been thinking hard about this since Donna Johnson and Richard Ha asked me to come here.

The Practice of "Sacred"

When I was in my mid-twenties, I lived and worked in a little town in India for two years. It was a profound time for me as I learned about the world, the people of India, my culture as an American, and myself. Above and beyond the construction projects I was doing, the chickens I raised, and the rats I killed, I saw some eye-popping things.

One was the aftermath of a set of vicious communal riots in which Hindus and Muslims tried to kill each other even though they were neighbors. This still happens periodically. Back then it always seemed to start with a perceived insult, a cow

¹ "Science and Native Culture can Co-Exist," Honolulu Star Advertiser, May 6, 2015.

accidentally hit by a Muslim truck driver or an affront to an Imam at the local mosque. But that incident was just the start.

After that precipitating moment came the incitements of absolutists and zealots on both sides, often for their own political purposes. Then, the formation of mobs and a funneling of past indignities and injustices into the new incident. Finally, crowds of bored or alienated young men full of adrenalin would rampage through the streets, pull people from their beds, hack them to death with machetes and swords, rape women, and then torch the homes and stores of their enemies.

In India, a lot of this was, and still is, ostensibly about cows. Cows are sacred to Hindus. That's where the expression "sacred cow" comes from. There are wonderful old legends and stories that explain why cows are revered and how they turned into allies of the gods. I love hearing and reading those stories. But then one day I saw something that cut across my abstract understandings. It was a terrible moment.

A bullock cart broke an axle near my house and the two-wheeled cart crashed to the ground spilling boxes of vegetables, bags of rice, and cans of cooking oil. One of the man's two beautiful white Brahma bulls was on its side, moaning, its leg bent and bleeding. A crowd gathered to watch, me included, standing in the back.

The distraught farmer, poor by any standard, was looking at his bull and crying. These animals were his livelihood, his small wealth, his friends, and his pets. He loved them. They were like his children, his family. A policeman arrived, then someone who seemed more experienced with animal injuries. He shook his head and pulled on his mustache while the farmer wept uncontrollably. The animal was in pain and in my world would have been mercifully euthanized.

Nothing like that happened. Pushing and shoving, they got the injured animal to the side of the road and left him there. Then a small truck appeared, people helped the farmer load his goods and cracked ox cart in the back, and drove off. The farmer then walked away down the road with his other animal. The ox with the broken leg was abandoned.

I thought to myself: *I can't stand to see animals suffering like this.* In my culture, even though it would pain me, I would put a bullet into the animal to get him out of his misery. But it was different in India, and this wasn't my culture or worldview or value system.

Later when I tried to understand what was going on, friends told me it was all karma, all preordained. That magnificent white bull may have been the reincarnation of someone from another life who needed to suffer more before being reborn. Or maybe it was the farmer who needed to suffer before his own rebirth. But everyone knew what I as an American didn't. Intentionally killing a cow in public in a Hindu community would be unfathomable. It would trigger a great violence.

So today I am thinking about the contradictions and paradoxes of what is sacred in my life and might be in yours and how we can only know these things within the boundaries of our worldviews and cultures and only by talking to each other with genuine curiosity and a lot of respect.

“Worldview” and “culture” are mysterious terms. We throw them around, talk past each other about them, and sometimes use them as a sword or a shield in politically charged matters. The very best definition of culture I have ever heard is: “Culture is the way we do things right *here*.” It is about time, food, social standing, relationships, who we pray to, and who hangs out with whom, always with the particulars of right *here* in mind.

Worldview is harder and in some ways more basic because it is like that metaphorical fish swimming in water. Does a fish even know that it lives in water? Is it even aware in some part of its fish-being that there is something called *water*? Or is it simply so obvious that the fish never reacts to it, at least until its gone. Just like we don't think about air until it is degraded or gone or until our lungs don't work right.

“Worldviews” are the waters we swim in, those fundamental beliefs that are so basic we barely recognize them, rarely talk about them, and almost never question them. Worldviews and culture run hand in hand. “Different worldview? Different culture.”²

The problem is, we all live in and embody multiple cultures and worldviews. Maybe in the old days we all lived in one culture with highly integrated worldviews but not any more. None of us in this room are just one thing. We are many things that overlap and take root in us individually.

² “A Roaring Force from One Unknowable Moment” by Mary Evelyn Tucker interviewing Kathleen Dean Moore, *Orion*, May-June, 2015 p. 34.

I am someone with Jewish forbearers, a line of people who were killed in concentration camps and burned in mass ovens. Some of my worldviews have been shaped by that. But I am also from this place, the only real home my wife and children have known and where I live. Part of this place is in me. (I have always secretly thought “local” is where you plan to die, not just where you were born but that may not be a popular idea right now.)

I am also a social scientist by training, a Baby Boomer, a planner and mediator by occupation, and a writer by avocation when the mood suits me. I am married into a large local family with people who have Japanese, Okinawan, Hawaiian, Filipino, Chamorro, and Mexican blood lines. All of these things influence the way I think and how I behave. This is exactly what makes our Mauna Kea discussions so difficult, especially when we talk about things that are sacred.

We are all many things and whatever else our ancestors may have been, we are something different now. Look around. We all came from someplace else. From the Marquesas, Tahiti, China, Portugal, North America, Japan, the Philippines, and now from Micronesia, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. We are neighbors and like Hindus and Muslims, we all carry different “cultures” and “worldviews” and pray in different ways but we are all now here. We are what we are. There is no going back.

Inside all this complexity we know that certain things are sacred to other people but we don’t always know why and how and we don’t seem able to talk about these matters with curiosity. Instead we make judgments. We trade slogans and arguments and lecture each other. Which doesn’t seem to work that well.

As I have been trying to think through what is sacred and what is not, here are a few examples that seem relevant.

For the Tlingit and other Northwest tribes, the natural world is sacred. They live in a world of thick forests, mysterious sea fogs, big bears, killer whales, salmon, seals and eagles. They also carve totem poles, which are revered, even though they aren’t direct objects of worship. They are clan matters, perhaps more like *aumakua*.

For Westerners, however, the poles are art and decorations and many of them have been taken away to other places over the years. They didn’t know. Today, people have learned that the Tlingit cherish their poles and are respecting them in new ways. That is why, after dialogue and negotiations, the Honolulu Academy of Arts is returning an important one to southeastern Alaska.

We also know certain books are holy even though the books themselves aren't usually worshipped directly. The Bible, The Koran, and The Torah are important objects and when someone burns one or denigrates it, it creates offense. That is because those books give comfort and guidance on how we are expected to live, on how the sacred is to be pursued and lived.

Then there are gatherings. In all places, some get-togethers are sacred because they commemorate bigger things. Christmas. Passover. Ramadan. Makahiki. These are a special "time outs," tributes, memorials, remembrances. When people act badly at these gatherings, it creates an insult even though the very same behavior at some other place or time might be perfectly fine.

Same with certain specific gatherings of family, clan, and community. Those moments become sacred because we take time off from business-as-usual to remember the people on whose shoulders we stand. The ancestors themselves weren't always that sacred. In my line there were plenty of rascals and knuckleheads. Still, it is the memory and moment of my family coming together and thinking about them that has a certain sacred quality. That is because we are together and feeling things bigger than ourselves. Bad behavior at these times is rude.

Today, we need to understand Mauna Kea, which is an old and iconic mountain and why it is important right *here* and *now*. All over the world, there are old mountains like this, sacred in different ways to different people and for different reasons. Think of Mt. Rainier in Washington, Mt. Shasta in California, Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mt. Olympus in Greece, and Mt. Fuji in Japan.

Philosophers explain this special reverence for certain mountains as a "Mundi Axis", the connection between ground and sky. Some mountains are ladders up from the earth to the heavens, a linkage point from the everyday ordinary run-of-the-mill place where we live up into the realm of gods and spirits, our connection between the secular and the sacred, both of which we all carry inside us. We *all* carry both.

Is it possible that one place can be sacred to different people in different ways or does it all have to be the same? Does Jerusalem have to be only Christian, Muslim or Jewish? Can different tribes or language groups living on different sides of the mountain revere a Mt. Everest or a Mt. Kilimanjaro differently, or must it be in one way only?

It's just my opinion and I mean no offense, but I don't think the sacred ultimately lies in "things". Churches, holy books, icons, and mountains are doorways to different zones. The zones may have similarities but they can look and feel and be different. Native Hawaiians can understand the zone one way, astronomers another, and people like me and some of you different from either.

For me it comes down to how we behave, to protocol, ceremony, ritual and conduct, to doing things in a right way. It is, to quote a Hawaiian teacher, attempts to be *kīnā'ole*, flawless, to do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, and for right reason and in ways that are good for us and don't dishonor others. Cultures and worldviews have a right to differ so it doesn't have to be your way or my way or just one way.

For me, the sacred is first and foremost about behavior. It is about self-restraint. I don't get to euthanize a cow in India even though in my worldview and culture I can't stand seeing them suffer. I don't get to sing silly songs or drink a beer in churches in Europe or mosques in Istanbul. Those places are someone else's juncture, the spaces where their yearning for something higher meets their moment.

To put it plainly, I believe that in life we are what we *do*, not what we say, not what we write, not what we think or profess, but what we *do*.

Which brings me to the second theme of how we talk about touchy things like this when times get hard and the heat goes up.

Constructive Engagement and Leadership

In Hawaii, we have become accustomed to dealing with difficult subjects like Mauna Kea through nasty blogs and tweets, argumentative press releases, bad tempered public meetings, three-minute position statements at legislative hearings, and through endless litigation (which actually might just be the nearest thing we have to eternal life on earth).

Don't misunderstand me. We need brave and dogged people who raise important issues and challenging criticism. We need them to speak out and call our attention to injustice and discrimination. But at the right time and in the right way with the right people and in the right spirit, we must have solution-seekers and answer-finders.

If we don't have that kind of leadership, we remain in persistent agitation with a constant disconnect between our senses of "peace" and "justice". Some people may

desire our minds to continue churning and frothing forever but most of us ordinary people eventually get fatigued by it and find it produces a lot of friction and not much enduring light.

“Peace” and “justice” are slightly different terms for “harmony” and “fairness”. Those two things are yin and yang, juxtaposed, impermanent, rotating, changing. The devil is always in the details as the complexion of a particular problem changes over time and circumstance. And the connections between them are fragile.

That is why we need people who can help us broker both notions by building at least temporary suspension bridges between them. That is the leadership challenge after an issue like Mauna Kea has been fully raised and roared into the public’s mind.

I am not saying what is going on now is bad. I am not afraid of conflict but I also know there comes a time when we must make the friction productive. Here is my big worry.

In Hawai’i too many of our public conversations always seem to focus on short term fixes and miss the deeper issues and potentially transformative moments. We look at the precipitating incident and think: *Ah, that’s the problem*. It’s TMT or the solar telescope on Haleakala. We focus on Super Ferry and forget to work on our off shore blue trails and near shore resources which are deteriorating. We focus on Ho’opili or GMO and miss the chance to talk about a more vibrant agriculture for the Islands. We zero in on wind turbines in Haleiwa or the geothermal plant in Puna and somehow forget to talk about a bigger off-ramp from fossil fuels.

TMT gives us a powerful moment to work on deeper issues. It is a teachable and learnable moment, a reciprocal moment, and I fear we are likely to miss it again.

I worry that our current conversations will pass and we will have only talked about TMT and missed the harder discussion about the future of the mountain that is sacred to many people in many ways, not just Native Hawaiians, not just to astronomers, but to all of the people in your Hamakua communities and to the many others of us who have climbed it and walked on it and spent time there in awe.

When I was a kid with a partially formed brain, I believed passionately in sports, rock and roll, and fast cars. I still kind of like those things but today, in the face of so many escalating world problems, so much urgency, I am committed to finding the wisdom of constructive negotiations through well-organized groups of people who

come with reasonable good will, reasonable intelligence, reasonable civility, reasonable openness, and reasonable curiosity. If that happens, we can find good solutions. If we can't find those people, it won't happen.

There won't be good solutions for people on either end of the spectrum who have drawn hard lines and insist on all or nothing. When that happens, there is no room for discussion or problem solving. For the larger majority of us, we need our best leaders to come forward and serve as catalytic converters. We need them to bring people together to work on Mauna Kea and get some things done. If we don't have that, we will have again missed the moment.

Let me be very specific. We need leaders to convene and lead negotiations that focus on revisiting and improving the Comprehensive Management Plan, a document that actually contains many practical ideas if people will take the time to read it.

We need focused political and economic conversations on ceded lands and proper lease rents.

We need leaders to help stakeholders and rights-holders complete the promises that were made in the past and not kept and that must be fulfilled with ironclad assurances.

We need discussions on what happens on the mountain when the Mauna Kea leases are finally up.

We need to hear from a more united and fully credible set of Native Hawaiian voices on how Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians should behave respectfully when they are on the mountain. We need specific guidance on protocol, not generalities, but specifics.

We need a timetable, schedule of actions, and coordination.

Finally, this. I love science and I find peace in certain sacred places, including old mountains. For me a science operation like TMT and the sacredness of Maun Kea don't need to be enemies. They can work hand in hand if the behaviors on the ground are right.

I'll end with a poem by a colleague who works in some of the worst conflict zones on the planet, places where people die when they twitch the wrong way or say the wrong word, a person who is building those small suspension bridges between peace and justice one at a time.

He writes:

*I dream the day
When by the coal fire
Your great grandchildren
Climb on the laps of your children
And beg not to be put off to bed:*

*“Grandma, Grandpa.
Tell us again.
How did the troubles end?”³*

Thank you for letting me speak and I apologize if any of my ideas of caused offense.

³ “For the Children of the North” by John Paul Lederach