

## The Breath of God

### Seeing Hebrew/Christian Spirituality through Hawaiian Eyes

Message by Dave Brisbin: Delivered 2/7/10

Audio Recording: <http://www.theeffect.org/resources/messages/2010/The%20Breath%20of%20God.mp3>

Notes compiled by Dave Brisbin

## The Breath of God: A Primer in Pacific/Asian Theology

by Belden C. Lane

Belden C. Lane is professor of theological studies and American studies at Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri. This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, September 19-26, 1990

Full Article: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=810>

The wind was still strong as we came down from the crater rim on Haleakala shortly after sunrise. Waiting alongside others in the 4 A.M. darkness, we had watched the sun rise out of the Pacific like an orange-red ember. It was a cold morning. Standing at 10,000 feet, people huddled in blankets against the 50-mile-an-hour winds from the East. The winds in Hawaii almost always come from the East, and are strong, steady, insistent. Like the frequent "northeasters" of New England and the sirocco of the Algerians, it seems never to cease. The ancient Hawaiians called it "ha," the breath of God.

For thousands of years this wind has formed the physical and spiritual life of the peoples of the Pacific. Its consistent direction allowed early Polynesian explorers to travel thousands of miles over the ocean in simple, koa-wood canoes. The wind has also brought rain, washing the verdant mountain forests on the windward side of the islands. In Hawaiian mythology, wind heralded Lono, the god of storm and rain and hence of fertility. Like Ezekiel and Job, the Pacific peoples have known that God often speaks from the whirlwind. Theirs is a faith shaped by "*aloha*," a word drawn from two roots, meaning "in the presence of wind, breath or spirit." In Hawaii, to speak of God means necessarily to be open to the often disturbing and life-giving wind of the spirit.

**Thomas Merton:** (From "Opening the Bible")

It is of the very nature of the bible to affront perplex and astonish the human mind. Hence the reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage. The Bible is without question one of the most unsatisfying books every written—at least until the reader has come to terms with it in a very special way. But it is a difficult book to come to terms with. Far easier, perhaps, if one just *pretends* the question is all settled in advance...the Bible raises the question of identity in a way no other book does. When you begin to question the Bible you find that the Bible is also questioning you. When you ask: "What is this book?" you find that you are also implicitly being asked, "Who is this that reads it?" ...one does not go from answer to answer but from question to question. One's questions are answered, not by clear, definitive answers, but by more pertinent and more crucial questions. We are to understand life not by analyzing it but by living it in such a way that we come to a full realization of our own identity.

**The Cloud of Unknowing:** (Anonymous Author)

Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him whom I cannot know. Though we cannot know him, we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced—never by thought. ...in the beginning [of our

journeys] it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being...you will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself, it must be within this darkness and this cloud.

### **The Breath of God (continued)**

In Hawaii I received a new name, one that defined me in ways I did not want to accept. I came to be known as a *haole* (pronounced HOW-lee) a term that Hawaiians have applied to white-skinned foreigners since the arrival of the British sea captain James Cook in 1778. At first they welcomed Cook as a god and believed his ships came to the islands on the winds of Lono, but his incessant and arrogant demands for provisions soon made him appear considerably less than divine. His men took the women they wanted and shot anyone who got in their way. The word *haole*, perhaps not inappropriately, means "without breath, wind or spirit"; a colorless, paste-white absence of spirit and feeling, an inability to appreciate the land and the dignity of its people. This name challenges the presumed superiority of white Western thinking, with its tendency to objectify and oppress. Yet to be able to recognize oneself as *haole* is also to be open to repentance, and subsequently to a new wholeness. To accept a new name is also to entertain a new way of being.

To recognize oneself as *haole* is to realize, with joy as well as a certain sense of loss, that the gospel is neither as Western nor as white as many of us have been prone to think. The Spirit of God broods over the waters of East and West, breathing new life in both directions. Known in Hebrew as *ruach*, in Greek as *pneuma*, in Latin as *anima*, in Sanskrit and Chinese as *prana* and *ch'i*, or in Polynesian as *mana*, the sacred wind of God's breath cannot be limited to the categories of thought most familiar to Western theology.

How does one summarize for Western Christians how the breath of God moves over the waters and speaks with critical insight to the "breathless" character of Western religious experience—its tendency toward individualism and compulsive action, its overly spiritual rejection of the natural world, and its general posture of dominance and conquest? In the disorientation of being renamed and identified as an outsider -- a white, male Westerner -- I found many of the assumptions underlying my worldview questioned. As told through the voice of Pacific and Asian peoples, the gospel has five interconnected pieces, each of them offering new understandings of how faith can be breathed into our daily lives.

**The first element is *manawa*, the slowing of time.** Traditional Hawaiian attitudes toward time and work are very different from the hurried drivenness of most Westerners, who seldom have time "to catch their breath." Time, for many of us, is a series of short-winded, fleeting intervals, crying out to be filled. But *manawa* signifies instead "the lingering, gentle ebb of water across a tranquil bay," and in this way of thinking, time isn't so much something to be used as it is a place in which one tarries with a "three-mile-an-hour God," alongside of whom one walks without hurry-- the patient, rhythmic breathing of one step following another.

In Polynesian mythology, no hero is more famous than Maui, the mischievous trickster. In one tale, Maui captures the sun with ropes early one morning as the brilliant orb rises over the crater of Haleakala. After lassoing each ray of the rising sun, he tied them to a Wiliwili tree, making the sun promise to slow down in its passage across the sky. This would give his mother time to finish without haste her daily chores of drying tapa cloth and preparing food. As a result, Hawaiians have always been invited to share in the slowing down of time-- time as a function of spirit and breath--something far different from the digital inflexibility many Westerners have made of it.

***Mindfulness—awareness of our presence in moment.***

**Cloud of Unknowing:** God, the master of time, never gives the future. He give only the present, moment by moment—for this is the law of the created order, and God will not contradict himself in his creation. Time is for man and not man for time. God, the Lord of nature will never anticipate man's choices, which follow one after another in time. Man will not be able to excuse himself at the last judgment, saying to God: "You overwhelmed me with the future when I was only capable of living in the present."

**Matthew 6:28-34:** And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *clothe* you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

**A second feature is *aloha 'aina* the love of the land.** Hawaiians deeply appreciate place and seldom generalize God's presence in an abstract way, but find it in specific places -- here in the circle of stones beside the Pandanus tree, there in the thick bamboo forest on the trail to Waimea Falls.

This insistence of life is most telling on the windward side of the islands. There everything bends to extravagance. Flame-red torch ginger and plumeria blooms grow wild and profuse on the road to Hana. Yet everything dies in equal exuberance. The flora molds and rots, ever making room for the new. The wooden porch from which one surveys the sea is slowly carried away by tiny ants working everywhere underfoot. Green moss waits nearby to reclaim what had once been separated from the earth. *'Aina* describes all this: "the land" is literally "that which feeds," nourishing the spirit in its prodigal display of bounteousness.

***Prayerfulness—awareness of God's presence in moment.***

**The Way of the Pilgrim:** Remember God always, everywhere and in all situations...When you behold light, remember who gives it to you, when you see heaven and earth and sea and all that they contain, be in awe and give praise to their

Creator. When you put on your clothes, remember whose gift they are and give thanks to Him who takes care of your needs.

**Nephesh hayya:** Gen 2:7—All scripture is **God-breathed** (theopneustos) 1Tim 3:16

**Mat 25:32-36** All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.'

**A third aspect of a Pacific/Asian gospel is *mo' olelo*. the power of the spoken word.** In Hawaii, theology is always to be chanted or sung. Sacred chants were traditionally practiced on the beach so as to reproduce the modulations of wind and waves. To "do theology" the Pacific/Asian way is to connect one's innermost being to the presence of God in the surrounding environment, by means of breath. It is an inescapably physical, sacramental experience. This contrasts with Western theology's bias toward the written expression of abstract thought.

Sacred tales must be spoken. There is power in their words, a force coming from the sound "breathed" into them. Traditional Hawaiians emphasized this oral power in storytellers, those skilled in the art of *apo*, "catching" the spoken word so as to allow the event to be re-experienced. This ancient tradition is reflected in the contemporary Pacific/Asia practice of talk-story. Unlike Western narratives that strive for a balanced, formal structure, talk-story is a rambling way of remembering the past so as to create it anew in the changing moment. In the past century, plantation workers would gather to talk in the evenings near the pineapple fields. One of them might ask in pidgin English, "Rememba wen we wuz small kid time?" and the fragmented tales of the past would be spun out in the shape of fantasy, lending a dignity to the hardships of the present. A mother would often talk-story to her daughter at night as she went to sleep, making it impossible to know where the stories left off and dreams began. It is the nature of talk-story to be open-ended, given to dreamlike images, intimately available to the spirit.

***Mindful Prayer—seeing the connection between our prayers and reality, living our faith***

**Genesis 1:3** Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

**John 20:22** And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

**Lord's Prayer:** (From Da Jesus Book---NT in Hawaiian Pidgin English)

Jesus wen teach lidis: "So, pray lidis:

God, you our Fadda.You stay inside da sky.

We like all da peopo know fo shua how you stay,

An dat you good an spesho inside, An we like dem give you plenny respect.  
We like you come king ova hea now.  
We like everybody make jalike you like, Ova hea inside da world,  
Jalike da angel guys up inside da sky make jalike you like.  
Give us da food we need fo every day.  
Let us go, an hemo our shame Fo all da kine bad stuff we do to you,  
Jalike us guys let da odda guys go awready,  
An we no stay huhu wit dem Fo all da kine bad stuff dey do to us.  
No let us get chance fo do bad kine stuff,  
But take us outa dea, so da Bad Guy no can hurt us.  
Cuz you our king, You get da real power,  
An you stay awesome foeva. Dass it!" (*Matthew 6:9-13*)

**23 Psalm:** Da Boss Above, he take care me,  
Jalike da sheep farma take care his sheeps.  
He goin give me everyting I need.  
He let me lie down wea da sweet an soft grass stay.  
He lead me by da water wea I can rest.  
He give me new kine life.  
He lead me in da road dat stay right,  
Cuz I his guy.

**A fourth factor is ‘ohana, the importance of family and community.** The universe is seen as an immense family tree; all things in it are related.. ‘*Ohana* describes the family connectedness valued so highly in Hawaiian experience. Derived from the word *oha*, referring to the tiny, interconnecting roots of the taro plant, it is an appropriate image for the closely knit community where relationships serve as an anchor of identity. In Hawaii I had experienced hospitality and graciousness like nowhere else.

The traditional Hawaiian family carefully preserved its own proverbs and chants, its occasions for house blessings and the naming of children, its rites of inhaling the first light of day and the conferring of creative powers by exhaling. As in similar Native American traditions, "all these symbolic images and gestures are associated with the wind and with the breathing of the universe -- the visible motion of the power that invests everything in existence" To exist in family is to experience an insistent Chinook wind, blowing warm in winter and cool in summer, lending a direction and center to all that one does.

***Connectedness—awareness of identification with others and God***

**Luke 10:29** ... "And who is my neighbor?" [Good Samaritan]

**Finally, Hawaiian spirituality includes -‘eha ‘eha -- the cry for justice.** This emerges out of the dislocation and pain that many along the Pacific Rim have suffered. The Pacific holds the restless memories of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the plight of Vietnamese boat people on the China Sea. What Jerusalem was in 587 B.C.E -- a symbol of anguish and loss -- Tokyo stood for in 1945 and Saigon in 1972.

In *Theology of the Pain of God*, Kazoh Kitamori suggests that the heart of the gospel is found in God's own excruciating pain witnessed most powerfully in the cross of Jesus Christ. This pain grew out of God's deepest longing for justice and love. The Hawaiian word for such agony is *'eha 'eha*. Referring to the physical effort of "hard-breathing" or "panting," this is a heart-rending, lung-bursting experience of brokenness, like a woman's experience of childbirth. But out of it comes a divine cry for justice that refuses to be silenced.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow tells a rabbinic story about the disclosure of God's name to Moses at the time of the Exodus. As an afterthought, having revealed the holy name of Yahweh, God also gives to Moses a "nickname" to use with those people who may not recognize Hebrew. What is the name of God that *everyone* will know? "Yaaaaah" (the sound of breathing), Moses is told. That is enough. That name will be spoken in the slave huts of Egypt and uttered in pain by the oppressed. To that call God responds with hope and deliverance from bondage.

**James 1:2-4** Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

These themes speak to Western theology with a deep, prophetic simplicity. They invite us to the humble posture of the *malihini*, the "beginner" who always perceives the truth as surprise. Here it is that a *haole* like myself must always begin if he or she is to be surprised by grace.

I'm told that the Maoris of New Zealand sing a hymn known as *haha* as they invoke the divine breath or wind on those being initiated into tribal mysteries. It is a holy laughter that falls like a spring breeze on people made newly open to the truth. Given the enormous unpredictability of grace, it seems also to be a gift made available even to *haoles*. Reflecting on theology in a Pacific/Asian context requires learning a new story, chanting to the universe, imitating the winds. It comes to us, finally, as a freeing movement of God's Spirit across deep, blue sea waters.