

Religion and development in Samoa: Time to draw on the strength of local culture?

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ABSTRACT

Motivation: As in much of the Pacific, Samoans understand their culture through Western religious lenses. Christianity and *fa'a-Samoa* (culture and practices) are entangled; they determine Samoa's daily reality of governance, society, and economic development. Discussing Samoa's development over the past two centuries without addressing Samoan agency in maintaining the Christian mantle to navigate their worldviews would misinterpret modern Samoa. Policy and investment for economic development, especially foreign aid, is largely determined at national level. Samoa's most vital communities to effect change, however, are local: church congregations and their leaders.

Purpose: I examine the intersections of religiosity and Samoa's development. Should foreign aid donors consider Samoa's religious communities to implement effective education, poverty, and development programmes if religion is regarded as a cultural entity?

Methods and approach: I used *talanoa* to collect data from discussions with directors of two leading aid donors in Samoa, the United Nations (UN) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Aid Coordinator for the Government of Samoa. *Talanoa* is a face-to-face dialogue often used in Pacific communities.

Findings: Religion plays a significant role in Samoan society. Samoans view economic development, improvement of the lives of ordinary citizens, job stability, and education as part of the *manuia* (blessings) of Samoa's religious and political status and community *tapuaiga* (prayers). That said, religion is not considered in formal discussions of aid and development. The interviewees all agree that aid donors should understand the role of religion in daily society.

Policy implications: Perhaps it is time for aid donors and Christian Pacific Island Countries to use these unorthodox methods for positive economic and social changes. As stated in Samoa's World Summit on Sustainable Development Assessment Report, "the potential

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influential standing and the extensive outreach of the church within the community makes it a valuable vehicle to drive pro-harmony strategies" (Government of Samoa, 2000).

Keywords: aid practice, culture, development, religion, Samoa

1 Introduction: Christianity, culture and development in Samoa

With its motto "Samoa is founded on God" (Fa'avae I le Atua Samoa), Christianity in Samoa is reflected in active church attendance, reverence for the clergy, and financial contributions to its church institutions. Modern Samoa has not separated Christianity from the political, economic and daily society, instead, this religious institution remains essential to understanding its development processes. In a study on churches and the economy in contemporary Samoa, religious experiences are "anything but nominal: it is intense and active" (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2011, p. 304). Naturally, the discussions of foreign aid development in Samoa have been dominated by mainstream economic narratives, with little understanding of its cultural and religious contexts. Selinger (2004) defines culture as the "social, political, economic and religious systems that interact to create society," and as a result, religion is a "central and definitive element of culture, [that] has to be addressed if development is to be both successful and sustainable" (Selinger, 2004, p. 524). This article concerns Pacific peoples' voices on aid and development in the Pacific region focused on two main points: first, the relevance of Christianity to Samoa's culture, politics, economics and law; second, the relative lack of scholarship on religion and development in the Pacific.

This preliminary study of religion-development interactions in Samoa would contribute to the scattered scholarly debates on this topic, a conversation happening in other regions worldwide (Fountain & Troughton, 2019). In particular, this special issue briefly addresses how foreign aid givers' should consider Samoa's religiosity regarding aid assistance. With extensive research on religion and development in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East, there is a relative lack of scholarship on these discussions in the Pacific region. Much more work is needed to highlight these entanglements. In studies of religion and development in Africa, faith is no longer antithetical to its development rather, "faith becomes the conceptual fuel for the prospect of change" (Bornstein, 2005, p. 7). Similarly in Samoa, the urgency of research in this field will help engage the local religious communities in Samoa as the moving body of change to improve literacy, reduce poverty, and achieve goals toward development. Foreign aid in this article is not limited to only financial grants or gifts. Instead, it consists of all resources from physical goods, skills or technical know-how, and even loans transferred by donors to governments (Riddell, 2007). Development policies should be contextually informed and relevant, and in Samoa's case, this means engaging with Christianity.

2 Christianity and Fa'a-Samoa

Samoa's first interaction with European missionaries occurred in 1830, and the Gospel was not only a new religious teaching but a lifestyle associated with Western materialism and ideologies. Samoan historian Malama Meleisea argues that Christianity had a "leveling effect" in Samoan society by redefining chiefly power as a secular one and weakening their

spiritual authority over that of Christianity (Meleisea, 1992, p. 22). Consequently, Christianity became part of *fa'a-Samoa* (culture and practices) and was used to legitimate Samoan institutions of power (Meleisea, 1992, p. 23). The hybrid nature of the Church and *fa'a-Samoa* is often revered as travelling in the "same canoe," or *ua va'ava'alua le Talalelei ma le aganu'u*. Throughout Samoa's political and cultural progression over the past decades, Christianity remained the bulwark to direct Samoan society. Missiologists have labelled the Pacific region "the most solidly Christian part of the world" (Forman, 1982, p. 227). As Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall have argued about the Pacific region, "Christianity and politics, have redefined each other in ways that make the two categories inseparable" (Tomlinson & McDougall, 2012, p. 2). The reverence for Christianity is not based solely on theological teachings but on cultural authority. Samoans believe that *matai* (chiefs) accepted the Gospel on behalf of all Samoans. Therefore, *matai* established a *feagaiga*, or cultural covenant, to protect and nurture the institution of the Church and the clergy associated with it. Today, church leaders remain representative interlocutors to the changing times and key to discussing foreign governance and society's multifaceted issues.

According to the latest *Pacific Attitudes Survey* (PAS) the three pillars of Samoan society are the chiefs (*matai*), extended family (*aiga*), and the Church (*lotu*) (Leach, et al., 2022). With a population of nearly 196,000, over 98% claim to be Christian in Independent Samoa (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Almost three-quarters (74%) of those surveyed believed that "the Government should consult the Church when making laws" (Leach et al., 2022, p. 13). According to public opinion, religion and governance strongly impact one another. In the same PAS survey, when asked, "How much trust do you have in the Church leaders," an overwhelming 90% of the people surveyed have a "great deal of trust" in church leaders more than government leaders, family *matai*, and the police. Generally, the teachings of religion are sometimes at odds with international development policy (Clarke, 2006). However, churches have been key stakeholders in dialogue with governments and international donor communities. Naturally, the dominant religion became enmeshed with *fa'a-Samoa* and transmitted from generation to generation (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2003). In Samoa's "Pathway for the Development of Samoa" (Government of Samoa, 2021), the Government ensures that "Christian values" and culture and traditions are highly recognised in the decision-making of Samoa's development. Samoan villages are centred around Christian churches. With religion as a social norm, the dominant religions often impact how people live and make decisions (Bush, 2019). To meet the United Nations Development Goals, "church leaders" are instrumental stakeholders in mobilising communities, churches, businesses, and Government. Those in Government leadership are also vital members of village congregations and are prayed upon weekly to "do the will of God" and to put laws that reflect the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible.

According to the independent foreign policy think tank the Lowly Institute, Samoa receives over USD 150M yearly in bilateral and multilateral aid (Lowly Institute, 2023). Development aid to the Pacific region or developing countries does not consider religion a factor in delivering foreign aid. Foreign aid is distributed to the Samoan Government through various ministries and civil societies to support multiple sectors, and religion or faith is not a

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determining factor. However, Professor of Development Studies at the National University of Samoa Penelope Schoeffel believes religion is part of "Samoa's reality." Although aid donors know Samoa's cultural and religious structures, "consulting 'communities' is most effective if they understand that Samoa's strongest communities are church congregations" (P. Schoeffel, personal communication, November 16, 2022). As revealed by the *Pacific Attitudes Survey*, there is a high level of trust in "traditional institutions", which include village councils and church congregations, over government leaders. Faith was considered an "untapped development resource" to achieve the Millennium Development Goals during 2000-2015. A partnership between aid donors and faith-based organisations, especially in the Pacific context, could lead to the likelihood of success in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, addressing environmental issues, and promoting good governance.

Furthermore, in 2017, Samoa's parliament amended its Constitution to include, "Samoa is a Christian nation founded on God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Samoa Constitution, 2016). Although the broader populace enthusiastically welcomed this new religious-political status, there were reservations from various civil society groups, academics at the National University of Samoa and the Muslim League of Samoa. The questions critics raised were: What will this new amendment mean to Samoa? Will this religious status restrict practices contrary to moral and ethical laws? In terms of development, *Will Samoa's religiosity directly affect foreign aid?* Samoa made a firm religious and political statement with this amendment. The push for the amendment gives insight into how Samoa functions as a society and how *faith matters* when researching Samoa.

Religion should not be removed from development discussions, especially regarding foreign aid as it is relevant to culture, politics, economics and law. As part of secularisation theory and modernisation, religious institutions and their belief systems lose social significance as societies modernise. That is not the case in Samoa. As noted in the PAS, Samoans remain committed to the institutions of religion, namely Christianity, and subscribe to the nostalgia of religious organisations and the theological basis of belief. Max Weber's thesis on Protestantism and capitalism is evident in Samoan society. Rather than break the cycle of religious ideologies, generations remain committed to the institutions that "removed war" and brought "peace" within Samoan society. Whether or not contemporary Samoans are believers in the Christian faith, understanding a religious approach to development policy concerning culture, politics, governance, and economics is of inherent and necessary interest.

In discussions on development theory and practice post World War II, secular worldviews were foundational to conventional development understanding and policy; therefore, marginalising religion and faith as "primitive superstition" and "backward" was common (Haynes, 2007). In a recent Pew Research Center poll on religion in America, by 2070, a little more than half (54%) of all Americans will affiliate with Christianity. The same is true in Western Europe (Pew Research Center, n.d.). Samoans remain over 98% Christian according to the 2021 statistics. Due to Samoa's chiefly system, the reverence and practice

of Christian rituals will most likely be maintained as long as *fa'a-Samoa* is intact (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

3 *Talanoa* with aid co-ordinators

Christianity plays a critical role in Samoa and the Pacific, which also happens to be one of the most aid-dependent regions in the world. With foreign aid increasing in Samoa, this special issue examines Samoa's religiosity in the modern state and uses lenses for foreign aid givers to understand Samoa better. Using the qualitative research methodology *talanoa*, this research uses interviews conducted with the directors of two leading aid donors in Samoa, the United Nations (UN) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Aid Coordinator for the Government of Samoa. The *talanoa* is a methodology of data collection reflecting open face-to-face dialogue used with Pacific communities (Anae, 2019). The three interviewers gave me their verbal consent to use their quotes in this publication. As a preliminary examination, this research will show Samoa's religious reality and the implications that can be drawn for aid and development policy and practice.

All three interviewees recognise that religion is part of the fabric of Samoa life and that the social context is necessary to understand social, environmental and political issues. Still, aid is filtered indirectly to the Government and civil societies through a more national or secular framework. Effective bureaucracy at the national level is necessary and effective; however, when addressing "Pacific insights" into development, social networks, which include religious groups, faith leaders, community religious hierarchies and their networks, should be highlighted because mainstream Christian teachings and attitudes often dictate national, local, and private activities.

The Unit Head of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Pacific Country Office (personal communication, February 17, 2023), knows the Samoan social and religious contexts. With projects and technical assistance, ADB prioritises meeting the national and sector goals of the Government of Samoa. The community, Government, civil societies, and religious leaders are stakeholders. ADB funding is based on 16 criteria within a Country Performance Assessment (CPA) and arranged within four main clusters: economic management, structural policies, politics for social inclusion and equity, and public sector management and institutions. When asked about any conflicts between Samoa's moral and ethical standards that might cause the ceasing of funds, the answer was no. Instead, the ADB coordinator stated that funders "need to be aware" of the social context of Samoa's religiosity. ADB is more interested in providing the necessary aid to assist with Samoa's infrastructure and combat climate issues while at the same time funding projects that address poverty, gender, health, and education. As a secular funding source, ADB will recognise Samoa's religiosity but deal only at the national level regarding foreign aid.

According to the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations that oversees Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, and Tokelau, the central principle of the UN is their promise to "Leave no one behind." The pledge is inclusivity, hoping to eradicate barriers that would perpetuate discrimination and inequalities and leave groups of people "further and further behind." Foreign aid by the UN is not given directly to religious groups but to the Government and

civil societies that may support religious-related projects that meet the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation framework, which is: addressing national priorities and gaps in the countries' pathways towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals; build partnerships with host governments and with all stakeholders including civil society, academics, and the private sectors; tackle inequalities and focus on inclusion of all groups; providing tools to UN country teams to meeting needs and realities. The UNDP Samoa Spotlight Initiative was launched in 2020 to prevent gender-based violence through programmes, workshops, and discussions. Christian Church organisations play a significant role in changing the cultural norms to end violence. This is one example of how religious stakeholders play an imperative role in ending violence against women and girls. National campaigns have targeted communities linked to religious groups to be at the forefront of these changes. When asked about Samoa's religiosity and any effects on foreign aid, the RC responded that there are no limitations as long as the funding provided meets the overall objectives of the UN goals and "no one is left behind" (personal communication, February 7, 2023). Similar to the Spotlight Initiative approach, using religious groups can potentially build positive partnerships and play a key role in pushing to achieve the development goals.

After conversations with the UN Samoa and ADB Samoa, discussing religion and development with the Aid Coordinator of the Ministry of Finance from the Government of Samoa was imperative. Samoa's Aid Coordinator prioritised the national and sector plans of the Government. She reiterated similar points of the previous discussions with the UN and ADB that religious organisations are recognised in the overall development strategies of the Government but do not take precedence. According to the AC, the Government has a "harmonised approach that is sector wide" and "not religious driven" to achieve Samoa's national development goals (personal communication, February 28, 2023). It has been proven that the institution of the Church is well respected in Samoa, and government leaders should consider new avenues to building capacity.

Understanding Samoa's cultural/religious status is not necessary for aid negotiations, but it is suitable for aid donors to understand the role of religion in daily society. All three short communications support secular mechanisms that are set in place for foreign aid. Perhaps a more in-depth conversation is necessary to challenge these orthodox methods regarding an effective response by foreign aid givers. Christianity is a cultural identifier for Samoans, indirectly and directly affecting local, communal, and national decisions when considering issues of development policy in Samoa. In addition to the *talanoa* sessions, the PAS research, the change to the Samoan Constitution, limited but current scholarship on religion and development in the Pacific, and *fa'a-Samoa's* position have all shown the need for more attention on this topic. According to Bornstein (2003) religious beliefs will inform the ways economic development projects are "received, interpreted, and accepted in specific social and historical contexts" (Bornstein, 2003, p. 2).

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have challenged the secular orthodoxy, which neglects Samoa's close entanglement and engagement with religion, but I try to create a new space to begin a scholarly discussion of religion and development in Samoa. Unlike other economically

developed societies, secularism has not pushed Christianity off course from Samoa's core; thus, I argue in this special issue that from a Samoa perspective, religion is necessary to the discussions surrounding regional development policy debates. The supporting data in the *Pacific Attitudes Survey* of Samoa points to the fact that religion or religious affiliation is a leading factor in governance, community, and 'modern' indicators of national identity.

Although Samoa's strong Christian affiliation is not a factor in foreign aid, the convergence of faith and development is visible. Professor Schoeffel states this relationship is not limited to only rural Samoa but is widely seen in the "diaspora and the growing suburbs around Apia" (P. Schoeffel, personal communication, November 16, 2022). Samoans view economic developments, improvement of the lives of ordinary citizens, job stability, and education as part of the *manuia* (blessings) of Samoa's religious and political status and community *tapuaiga* (prayers).

Signs of a generally safe island society are the growth of tourism, the building of solid infrastructures representing a modern state, and a governance system supporting gender equality and freedom of religion. Samoa does not use its religious status to harbour terrorists or perpetuate Christian fundamentalism that affects foreign policies. Fortunately, *fa'a-Samoa* keeps Christianity accountable within society and vice versa. As societies become more modern, the assumption would be that there is more dependency on both financial and intellectual capital through grants, aid, loans and knowledge. For Samoa and many Pacific Islands Countries, there has been a reliance on "spiritual capital" or the dependency upon the tangible and intangible impact of spirituality within society (Martinez, Rogers, Yancey, & Singletary, 2011).

The relationship between Western donors and non-government organisations in Samoa and the Government of Samoa in delivering aid is strong. The multilateral discussions and negotiations remain intact. This special issue challenges the development orthodoxies of secularism in Samoa. Rarely will governments feature religion in their project analysis, documentation, research agendas, and dialogues because it is simply unorthodox or irrational to include such information (Haynes, 2007; Thomas, 2005). Perhaps it is time for foreign aid donors and Christian Pacific Island Countries to change their strategy toward development by using these "unorthodox" methods for positive economic and social changes. The Church and religion or Government can clash. Still, as stated in Samoa's World Summit on Sustainable Development Assessment Report, "the potential influential standing and the extensive outreach of the church within the community makes it a valuable vehicle to drive pro-harmony strategies" (Government of Samoa, 2000).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the

current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper reports analysis of primary data. Persons from whom data were collected gave their free, informed and prior consent and their data has been stored confidentially.

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