

CONGREGATIONALISM IN SAMOA AND THE DIASPORA

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JANET WOOTTON: Hello. My name is Janet Wootton, and I'm the co-chair of the International Congregational Fellowship Theological Commission, one of the co-sponsors of this virtual conference.

As you can probably hear, I'm in the UK, and we're privileged to have people with us from right around the world. So I should probably say good morning, good afternoon, good evening, all.

It's my delight to welcome you to today's virtual conference: "Mission and Transmission: Walking in the Congregational Way."

The Congregational Way is an expression of Christianity in every part of the world. For some, it spread through the mission agencies of the USA and UK. In other places, it was transmitted through shifts in population as a result of persecution and conflict or exploration and seeking new lives. But it's also arisen as a natural response to the Gospel, as God calls communities to express their lives in freedom.

The Theological Commission is part of the International Congregational Fellowship, which gathers Christian... Congregational Christians from many parts of the world. This virtual conference marks the legacy of the International Congregational Journal, which until recently, it recently ceased publication after nearly two decades of print run. Through the years, it's published many articles reflecting on the mission and transmission of the Congregational Way.

It's a great pleasure to be working with the Congregational Library & Archives, and I'll hand over to my colleague, Charles Packer to say a bit about that organization.

CHARLES PACKER: Thank you very much, Janet.

I am Charles Packer, and I am a Congregational minister in the United States, located in the state of Michigan. I serve the Pine Hill Congregational Church, affiliated with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. I am an instructor at the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan, and a member of the International Congregational Fellowship's Theological Commission. And I also serve on the Board of Directors of the Congregational Library & Archives.

The Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library located in Boston, Massachusetts. Established in 1853, the Congregational Library & Archives' mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century. This is accomplished through free access to a research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and a digital archive with more than 100,000 images, many drawn from its New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, the Congregational Library & Archives offers educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. Please check out the library's website, congregationallibrary.org to learn more about what it does and for news of forthcoming events.

It is my pleasure to introduce today's speaker. Brian Fiu Kolia, a second generation... is a second generation Australian born Samoan. He hails from the Samoan villages of Sili, Satapuāla, Faleaseela, and Tufutafoe. He is an ordained minister of the Congregational Christian Church Samoa and serves as a lecturer in Hebrew Bible and Old Testament at Malua Theological College. He holds a PhD from the University of Divinity, Naarm or Melbourne, Australia, and he is particularly interested in decolonizing readings and interpretation and cultural and Indigenous or Native knowledge. Most importantly, he is a husband to Tanaria and a father to Elichai.

It is my pleasure to turn our keynote address over to Dr. Brian Kolia.

BRIAN FIU KOLIA: Thank you so much, Charles, for that very generous introduction. And I offer warm greetings.

I'm from Samoa, but currently I'm in New Zealand for another meeting. And on that note, I just want to acknowledge that I am zooming in from the lands of Maungarei in Tāmaki Makaurau, otherwise known as Auckland. And I acknowledge the traditional owners of these lands, particularly the Ngāi Tāhuhu, the original custodians of these lands. I acknowledge also all Indigenous peoples that are in this meeting today, this morning, this evening, this afternoon, and offer warm greetings to you all.

So the title of my talk is "A Changing Church, But an Unchanging Bible: Congregationalism in Pasifika and the Diaspora." So before I give my talk, I want to give a brief history of Congregationalism in Samoa.

Christianity arrived on the shores of Samoa via the London Missionary Society to the village of Sapapalii on the island of Savaii on the 24th of August 1830. The mission was headed by a Baptist minister, the Reverend John Williams, and assisted by teachers from Tahiti. They were also helped by a Samoan couple, Puaseisei, and her husband Faueā. This Samoan couple

was residing in Tonga. The two were picked up by Williams after stopping in Tonga for some supplies.

Although its church polity were determined by the London mission to be aligned with Congregationalism, the Church in those early years took on the name of the London Missionary Society, simply called the LMS, or using the Samoan pronunciation of the letters La-Mo-Sa. The Samoan Church was also referred to by its more colloquial name of "Lotu Ta'iti," which is translated as Tahitian Church, as a nod to the Tahitian teachers who helped bring Christianity to Samoa.

Over the next number of years and decades, the Samoan Church saw the establishment of its theological college at Malua on the island of Upolu in 1844, which today remains the longest continuous running theological college in the Pasifika region. And that is the college that I currently teach it.

In 1860, the Bible was translated into the Samoan language, a project spearheaded by missionary George Turner, with the help of unfortunately nameless natives in the village of Avao, the Island of Savaii.

In 1961, just a century later, after the translation of the Bible into Samoan, in tandem with the political independence of Samoa, the church gained autonomy from the London Mission, and at the annual conference of that year, the Church took on the name the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa, a name which finally acknowledged its denominational affiliation.

Later, the Church underwent some name changes. Firstly, and these name changes consisted of just changes in the preposition that comes after the name church.

So firstly to the Congregational Christian Church in Samoa, a change of the preposition from "in" to... from "of" to "in," which was a result of a theological argument about the Church not belonging to Samoa as implied by the preposition "of."

And then finally the preposition was removed altogether, as the preposition "in" did not reflect the growth of the church to countries outside of Samoa, such as in New Zealand, Australia, the US, and Hawaii, as well as in Fiji and American Samoa. Thus, the Church to this day is known as the Congregational Christian Church Samoa.

Now a bit about the diasporic church. The majority of Samoans in Australia emigrated from New Zealand. So initially there was a mass migration of Samoans to New Zealand. And I mention Australia at this point because this is the context from which I come from. So I am a diasporic Samoan, and I belong to a church in Australia, a Samoan Church, and there's quite a number of churches, Samoan Churches, Congregational churches in Australia.

The patterns of mass migration to the south of Samoa began therefore with New Zealand, where mass migration of Samoans to New Zealand commenced around the end of the Second World War from the 1940s to the 1950s. Samoan scholar Felise Va'a notes that Samoans migrated to Australia soon after, between the early 1900s and the 1970s. But their motivation for migration was based on individual pursuits, and back then immigration laws were not as tight as they have become since.

However, since the 1970s, New Zealand would not be the final destination for a large number of Samoan migrants. With a larger economy and better job prospects available, mass migration of Samoans to Australia eventuated beginning in the late 1970s to the early 1980s.

Va'a, who writes of the early years of mass Samoan migration to Australia in his book, "Saili Matagi: Samoan Migrants in Australia," emphasizes the pull of economic well-being for both Samoan immigrants and their extended families back home as being the impetus behind their migration. Va'a comments that "studies on Samoan migration in Australia are few, no doubt because Samoans did not migrate there on a large scale until the 1980s."

The studies that have been conducted since the 1980s had been focused on certain cities where there was a concentration of Samoans in residence, such as Newcastle in New South Wales and other New South Wales towns such as Blacktown, west of Sydney. Va'a focuses on another New South Wales town of Canterbury-Bankstown, another city just on the outskirts of Sydney.

However, all three of these studies have been conducted in specific areas of New South Wales and therefore do not include Samoan diasporas such as Queensland, in Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory. And more recently Western Australia, South Australia, and the Northern Territory.

For the purposes of this presentation, it would be difficult to account for all of these Samoan settlements, so I will focus more on the motivations and the attitudes of Samoan migration to Australia.

Similar to Samoan migration to New Zealand, there was a tendency by Samoans in Australia to seek housing closer to areas where there were unskilled jobs available, such as coal mining and factory jobs and/or areas with cheap housing.

Over the years, more parts of New South Wales were settled, as well as Canberra for the same reasons. Melbourne in Victoria and Brisbane in Queensland also became areas of settlement during the 1980s as Samoans headed to other areas on the eastern side of Australia where there were more jobs and cheaper and newer housing as Sydney grew in population.

The 1990s saw people head west towards Perth and Fremantle, where the mines presented further job opportunities. The experience of living, working, and being educated in New Zealand put Samoans in good stead to take advantage of these opportunities. The demographics of Samoan settlement were no longer restricted to New South Wales, but now extended to the rest of Australia.

With the settlement of Samoans, Samoan Churches became established, which subsequently provided evidence of Samoan settlement. The significance of the churches is that they gave the Samoan communities a form of identity that replicated the villages in Samoa.

Macpherson and Macpherson argue that the identity of the village is synonymous with the church, "as though the church has always been the foundation of the village, its history, and its social organization." As such, Samoans in Australia not only set up churches to maintain their religious experience, but to establish continuity with village life in Samoa.

Additionally, Va'a claims that the church has provided many of the socio-economic and political functions of the Samoan village. They provide new arrivals with assistance in finding suitable accommodation and employment, financial support for the first six months before they are entitled to welfare benefits, and a forum in which they can interact with other Samoans. In other words, the churches became the Samoan migrant's village away from Samoa.

Decolonizing the Samoan Church Diasporically

The centrality of the Christian church in the Samoan context is visibly obvious through its many large church structures. However, as is noticed in the Samoan context today, the attendance levels in many villages are dropping. There is a growing lack of urgency in getting to church for Sunday services, where many younger people are inclined to stay home and take care of familial duties, such as cooking and taking care of the sick and elderly who are not able to attend church. Yet, such absences may also be an opportunity for others to make excuses for their own nonattendance, as is a common attitude found in Samoan village communities.

For whatever reason, the centrality of the church is not as prominent as it once was. There is not enough room in this discussion, this talanoa, for me to delve into the reasons behind this attitude of church attendance, nor is it my focus.

Rather, I want to talk about the centrality of the church and how this idea of centrality has manifested in the diasporic context. In Samoa, the church is a place that caters for the spiritual well-being of its people.

But as mentioned earlier, in the diasporic context, the church not only carries this spiritual focus from the homeland to the host land, but it also implements a new purpose that is not

spiritual in the narrow sense. This new purpose sees the church morph into a new village-like space for Samoans living abroad.

With this new identity comes responsibilities that are different from these traditional... those traditional responsibilities of the churches back in the homeland. In addition to spiritual well-being, church leaders are responsible for the physical and economic well-being of its parishioners. It is not unusual to find members of a church also working at the same place of employment, attending the same educational institutions, or even being members of the same sporting clubs. These other forms of memberships emanate from the networking of church members. This is even more crucial in modern times, with the large influx of seasonal workers from Pasifika to Australia.

For instance, the establishment of Samoan churches in the townships of farms and abattoirs where Samoan seasonal workers are stationed, provides Samoan workers with valuable supports such as housing, food and clothing, and any additional aid. For the Samoan seasonal workers, they too identify the Samoan churches as their village away from home.

Sadly, the Samoan seasonal workers who do not have Samoan churches, and similar for other Pasifika identities, find it tough and are more at risk to being exploited through inadequate housing, excessive and dubious pay deductions, and poor slave-like working conditions.

Clearly, the Samoan churches hold a significant position for Samoans in the diaspora because they are spaces that uphold the Samoan values of fa'aaloalo, respect; alofa, love; and the deep concern for aiga, family. These values are carried from the homeland into foreign contexts and are maintained in these established church communities.

This notion of carrying one's family, culture, religion, and its associated values is known as Maota Tau Ave, which is the Samoan word for "the house that is carried." Maota Tau Ave is also a Samoan proverb which pronounces a mandate for any Samoan who leaves their homeland to always remember where they came from and to always identify with one's culture and aiga, family.

Through Maota Tau Ave, one can see a decolonizing of the Samoan church. The transplanted church upholds the mission of spiritual welfare. But in the new context, the church is not just a spiritual place. It becomes a space for Samoans to network and to continue to uphold its Samoan cultural values.

The European missionaries of the past, who brought Christianity to Samoa, promoted the gospel in ways which negatively impacted Native culture, with many cultural practices considered "paganistic" and "savage." The diasporic church, however, becomes a space to nurture Samoan language and culture, which Samoan scholars Dion Enari and Lorayma Taula argue are at a decline in Australia. However, as long as the diasporic churches are still around, there will always be spaces, or space or spaces, to foster language and culture.

Sadly, one aspect of the church that is not being decolonized is the Bible. almost, or more specifically, Samoans' reading of the Bible. We are still overly pious and take ourselves too seriously when we read the Bible, and as a result we lose our Pasifika ability to be humorous.

Now, let me draw your attention to a Pasifika term known as mālie. Mālie is a term common to Samoans, Tongans, and other Pasifika cultures, that translates as humor, joy, and happiness. And it also means calmness and softness. But the missionaries taught us well by banning our so-called "savage" ways so that we can become more pious and read with a puritan mindset.

We need to decolonize our reading by lifting the ban that missionaries put on our people so that we may find mālie in and entertain Native mālie with the Bible.

In Pasifika, the Bible is privileged in private, domestic spaces, as well as in public and church spaces. The Bible is one of the pillars of Pasifika societies, where its interpretation is under the control of Christian churches. Invariably, our churches also control our theologies. And the upshot is that both our readings of the Bible and our theologies have lost our Native senses of mālie.

Here I attempt to uncover the Bible so that we may recover our senses of humor. In doing so, I will construct a hermeneutic of mālie that is built on the notion of uncovering humor without fear or apprehension, as Pasifika people often do outside of church spaces. This is the spirit in which I approach the text. To weed out the senses of mālie in the text, I will engage with the text through talanoa, or the Samoan mode, or Pasifika mode of conversation.

For Pasifika humor is best felt when conversing as Pasifika. In Samoan circles, this humorous type of talanoa is known as tala tausua, or just simply tausua. So from here I tausua with a particular text that I want to share this morning, or this evening: Exodus 14 and the complaining Israelites.

Reading Mālie: A Tausua Hermeneutic

It is easy for Samoans to be mālie in private conversations, but in public spaces we tend to bury our mālie orientations and effectively conceal or cover over our Nativeness. At this point, I want to highlight instances of humor in the Biblical texts that need to be uncovered or recovered.

By doing so, we retrieve our Native identities as a way of approaching and rereading the Biblical text that has often privileged Western ways of reading. To guide our reading, I want to use talanoa, which Havea describes as "the confluence of three things: story, telling, and conversation. Talanoa is not story without telling and conversation, telling without story and conversation, or conversation without telling and story. Talanoa is all three: story, telling, conversation as one."

Indeed, talanoa can be about mostly anything, from serious and formal matters, tragedy and pain, to comedy and humor. As mentioned before, talanoa that takes a comedic and humorous turn is usually known as tausua. There are other types of humorous talanoa, but the purpose of tausua is never to degrade or be derogatory, but to always elevate humor.

The word tausua when broken down etymologically can help us to understand how tausua works, and it is made up of two words: tau and sua. The word tau has an array of meanings as outlined by Samoan scholars, such as Nofoaiga, but for our purposes, the meaning of “to strive” is appropriate. The word sua in Samoan means “to dig.” In this sense, tausua can have the meaning of having a dig at someone or making fun. But it can also mean to dig out some humorous content for the sake of laughter.

And as mentioned before, the intention of tausua is never to hurt or to degrade a person, but a way of maintaining a sense of humor. Those who have a thick skin or cannot take a joke are said to be “lē tausua” or cannot tausua. So in order to tausua, one can take a dig, but must also have thick skin or have the temperament to handle jests and mocking.

This dynamic will be replicated in our reading. We may take a dig, or tausua, at the text, but also be ready for the text to tausua back at us, the readers. Our first point of call then is to sua, to dig for humor in the text. This implies that there is humor. We just have to dig for it. For Pasifika people, humor is also how we deal with trauma, because mālie not only makes us laugh, but mālie is soft, also softens the pain of trauma.

So let's turn to the text.

One story that depicts these nuances of mālie is after the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We have the Israelites, the whingeing Israelites. Now, let us sua for mālie. In Exodus 14, as Pharaoh and the Egyptians were pursuing the Israelites, the Israelites show mālie, humor, in their cry to Moses in verse 11: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”

Now when read through a tausua lens, we can picture the tausua of the Israelites, who use mālie humor through sarcasm to mālie relief, their trauma with a Pasifika perspective, We can uncover the mālie in the response by the Israelites.

First, in my Samoan context, finding a place for burial is not a problem because Samoans could be buried anywhere on their land. So the question that there were no graves in Egypt is mālie, because from a Samoan perspective, one can be buried anywhere on the land, even near the outdoor kitchen where food is prepped.

This might be unusual for Westerners, but it is not uncommon to be buried even on one's front yard as you can see in this picture. Every Samoan then has their place of burial. Only animals are buried in the wilderness, or the Samoan term used in the Bible, vao, because

animals belong to the vao. Now, this is mālie because the Israelites response equates themselves with land animals who belong to the vao.

For Pasifika people, the use of humor can also be a recognition that in situations where there is little to no hope, like what the Israelites are experiencing in the vao, the best way to react is through humor because there is not much to cry about.

In a sense, this is how the Israelites sound. Despite their cry being “in protest, complaint, demand, and hope,” the Israelites have found their voice. The words they utter are less of pain, but more sarcastic on two points.

First, of course, there are graves in Egypt. This is not a question of fact, but a humorous inquiry of intent.

Second, we cannot imagine the Israelites would want to go back to a life of slavery and oppression. Again, this is not a statement of fact, but a request to be rescued identified in comical terms.

But might it also be a reflection of their attitudes towards their migrant state, that when one is caught in between spaces, longing for the past can be a coping mechanism for their current situation if the present isn't quite what it was made out to be.

As such, this passage shows mālie relief, comic relief perhaps, as a way of dealing with trauma. The trauma for the Israelites is their impending death. And in dealing with this trauma, mālie is uncovered, because the Israelites claim to prefer slavery and not freedom.

In talanoa with Pasifika people, the events prior to Exodus 14 remind us of the seasonal workers scheme in Australia, in which farm and abattoir owners exploit Pasifika workers through neglect and exploitation, low wages and over deductions, and expensive and dreadful living conditions.

As you can see in that picture to the right, one... this is a picture of a figure. It's a three or four bedroom house that is housing all those Solomon Islanders. Yet to these Pacifica workers, the income they earn from these slavery-like labor schemes is much more than what they would earn at home, even after the excessive deductions. To them they are like the Israelites, where service to the Egyptians--read here the Australian farmers and abattoirs--is preferable to service in the vao, the wilderness in Samoa.

Now in conclusion, the changing face of Christianity in Pasifika reflects the adaptation of Pasifika peoples to a transnational identity. In this new identity, Pasifika people require some mode of constancy to their Native contexts so that they are able to survive and adapt to their new surroundings.

Strikingly, the nature of the church experiences a sort of strange inversion, a flipping. In the homeland, the church, through its profound and beautiful structures, seemed to intrude the village landscape, standing out like a giraffe in a meeting of elephants. The church, hence, promotes a largely spiritual concern, and in most cases, its mission seems to be more focused on what the people can do for the church, as opposed to the church... what the church can do for the people.

But in the host land, the Pasifika churches adopt a new role, one which has seen some Pasifika churches focus more on serving its people through networking and support. This is particularly evident in churches established where there is a large contingent of Pasifika seasonal workers. At the same time, the Pasifika churches, as seen through the Samoan churches, are upholding Samoan culture and language for its future generations. This flipping decolonizes the church by promoting Christ's purpose of service rather than being served.

However, one area which still needs decolonizing is our reading of scripture. We have flipped the church space in diaspora to be a space for cultural custodians to maintain language and culture. One of our cultural values is being mālie, and it seems that the Bible is still under the watch of the missionaries' colonial gaze. Uncovering mālie in the Bible requires us to lighten up in reading by unmasking our pious and seriousness with the holy book to expose our Native wits and humor.

For far too long, Pasifika have been instructed that Scripture is no laughing matter, but for Pasifika, to laugh is to cope with pain and trauma. To laugh is to remind us of our interconnectedness with creation. To laugh is to uncover our Native identity. Perhaps this is why the missionaries told us not to laugh, because our indigeneity was not pious and unholy. At the same time, like our tausua reading of Exodus 14, the texts can also remind us of the sufferings and distresses of our mob, our whanau, our aiga, our family around us.

But what about texts that do not contain humor and that are in fact tragic and horrific? What about texts that do not contain anything mālie, but only matters that cause sadness or anger?

Of course, not all texts contain humor. Yet, as valid as such questions may be, the voice of the colonial discourse lingers in the air because in these questions we are ordered not to laugh again. Should not the point of uncovering mālie be that we are laughing on our own terms?

And if not... if it is not a laughing matter, should that not be our call as well? In fact, a lot of Pasifika culture had been suppressed and marginalized by the missionaries. Today, we might be inclined to satirize mission managers, but the legacies of the colonial past still affect the way we read scripture today. Pasifika people continue to lose themselves in reading. Uncovering mālie can be one way of addressing this.

For Pasifika people in migration, the diasporic context of the host land provides another opportunity for decolonization. The holy book is no longer revered in Australia in the same way it is in Samoa. So there is room for a different perspective, an alternative way of approaching the Bible. For revealing mālie in scripture is to perceive the ironies and riddles, which might not be obvious because of our over-pious attitudes.

Uncovering mālie brings out the humor in scripture, but it may also disclose humor in public spaces, enabling Pasifika readers to maintain their Native identity in foreign lands and introduce a Pasifika world view of dealing with trauma and tragedy.

Thank you.

CHARLES: Thank you so much, Brian, for sharing those perspectives.

I took... despite the slides, I did take some notes, and that... the notion of finding the humor in the text is something that I think can speak to so many different contexts. But thank you for raising that as a particularly Samoan and Pasifika emphasis. That's extraordinarily helpful.

A couple of us have some questions. I have one that I will start with. I'm just curious, in North America, I know for sure that there are certain texts or certain concepts within Biblical texts that speak to the North American experience of Congregationalism and mission as there was migration from England to North America 400 odd years ago.

Are there texts that would speak... that just come to mind naturally to, for Samoans either in Samoa or in diaspora that speak to the Congregational Samoan experience?

BRIAN: Yeah, thanks. Yeah. Thanks, Charles.

Yeah, well, one particular text, I guess, you know, during that, that early period of the church in Samoa, there was a very strong missionary zeal because a lot of our Native pastors, our Native ministers in the early period of our church, you know, there was a mad rush to spread the gospel to other parts of Pasifika, such as Papua New Guinea and in neighboring islands of Tuvalu and Tokelau. And so, you know, obviously, Matthew, you know, the... go forth and make nations... and make disciples of the nations. That was a typical text that, you know, spoke to the Congregational spirit.

And you know, parts where, you know, the, where, you know, with... I mean, I can't recall the exact text because a lot of these texts are New Testament texts, and being a Hebrew Bible scholar, I yeah, I don't read the New Testament as often. Yeah. But, you know, the when, when they say like when there's one or two people in my name, in Jesus' name, that seems to be another text that represents the Congregational spirit here in, well, in Samoa.

Yeah. So those are the two that stick out in my mind. And I'm sorry that I can't quote the exact reference from the from the New Testament. But yeah, those two.

CHARLES: Thank you. Thank you.

David Powers has a, actually, not a question, but thanks from this New England Congregationalist for such a wonderful reminder of the importance of humor. Most vital.

And a question from John Thomas. In your teaching at Malua or in the congregations in Samoa or the diaspora, do you experience resistance to this hermeneutical approach? And if so, what strategies do you employ to overcome this?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's a great question.

So, you know, over the last decades, a few decades, at Malua, there was a strong sort of emphasis upon Western methodologies for historical criticism and all the different... And, you know, there is still some... there's still some colleagues of mine that still push that Western standard in reading. And so, you know, with those type of people in the midst, you would get some sort of resistance towards this hermeneutical approach.

However, what I do remind them is that even historical criticism and all those different Western approaches are also hermeneutics. I think there is this large assumption that, you know, that these things are the normative. But really, when you, when you look at it with a magnifying glass, these are Western hermeneutics, they are Western perspectives.

You know, to do historical criticism in reading is basically to read it through the lens of a white German scholar. And so the questions that arise from those methods and reading, they serve agendas and purposes in those contexts.

Now, what would a Samoan farmer who is trying to make ends meet, you know, and, you know, basically just goes to church every Sunday just to try and get spiritual nourishment, what interest does he have in something that was dug up in some, you know, area in Mesopotamia for his daily living? Probably nothing.

So, you know, the agendas that those type of methods serve, they don't really serve the people in our context. So by pushing the envelope a bit through reading in alternative ways, through Native frameworks, it also... I mean, it gives alternative insights, but it also serves the grassroots of our context, you know, to look at texts from Native perspectives. So, yeah, you know, it's a matter of... and sorry if I'm not answering the question properly, but it's a matter of trying to, trying to name what it is.

You know, I think there's a common misconception amongst people that, you know, doing, reading the text through Western methodologies and all that is not hermeneutics when really it is. It's just, you know, we got to, we got to label it, right?

I think Charles, you might remember at these meetings that we go to in November, in, for the Society of Biblical Literature. You know, we have a lot of different sections in those meetings, whether it's Asian studies, where it's Islander studies, where it's African studies. And it's funny that, you know, if it's a section organized by white scholars, if it's Deuteronomy, it's just Deuteronomy, right? But if it's organized by African scholars or Asian scholars, then it's an African or it's an Asian reading of Deuteronomy. But if it's organized by a white scholar, it's just a reading of Deuteronomy.

So it's like, white has been normalized and in, whiteness has been normalized in scholarship. And those are the type of things that I try to push back at in promoting Native and other alternative ways of reading.

CHARLES: Thank you.

Richard Cleaves has a question. Is there a more recent translation of the Bible, is there a contemporary translation that seeks to capture talanoa and mālie? Does the approach you describe capture the imagination of younger Samoans who are perhaps second and third generations, or are they abandoning the church?

An experience... describes among second generation Christians in Korean churches in the United States, where 85% of them have abandoned church. So a few questions, concerns there.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's a fantastic question and sadly, no.

I think the most recent translation of the Samoan Bible was, I think, in the early eighties. That is the most, earliest revised version. I think, 1981 it might have been. So, you know, that was what, over 40 years ago. And the language, the archaic language of the earlier, early translation, 1960, has sort of still been maintained in these later revisions of the Samoan Bible. So that is an issue in itself as well for our, for especially for second, third generation Samoans living in diasporic communities. And so it's a common problem.

And this is why I love this question because, you know, we constantly... I mean, helping our readers with interpretation is one thing, but also, getting them to understand words that no longer are used in the 21st century. You know, especially that very archaic type language. Yeah, that's, that presents another problem altogether.

So, I guess the ways around it is, you know, we encourage them to not only sit with the Samoan Bible, but also to sit with an English translation that they're comfortable with so that that can, you know, bridge that gap.

But yeah, great question.

CHARLES: Thank you.

Sarah Turlough asks, Do you feel that pious readings of the scripture have affected social issues in Samoan culture?

BRIAN: Yea, another great question.

Absolutely. I think that these pious readings of the Bible, you know, they serve an agenda. And that's one of the questions that I, that I encourage my students to ask. You know, who stands to benefit from these readings? And most of the time, they tend to, they tend to benefit those who want to, who are in control. The ones that hold power, that want to maintain the status quo.

And so, in our culture... well, in a lot of Pasifika cultures, there is that issue. And I think a lot of those pious readings tend to try and maintain order so that, you know, it's easier to control society, easier, you know, easier for the minister to control, easier for the village elders to control.

And so when you think about it more intently, it becomes also a big issue of patriarchy and society, because a lot of these decision makers are men. And so, yeah, these pious readings serve those particular agendas. So by opening up the texts to alternative ways of reading, it, you know, pushes for us to see the agency of women.

I think, you know, also to look at other characters and other voices that are being suppressed in the text. I mean, even the treatment of animals is something that, you know, I think that pious reading serves to maintain this control and domestication of animals in ways that are harmful to animals. And I see, you see a lot of that in a lot of some Samoan society in the way we treat animals. Yeah, it's quite sad. Yeah.

So, yeah, I think that's a great question. And yeah, my answer is yes.

CHARLES: Thank you.

A comment from Deborah Filabrown that she's reminded of Elton Trueblood's work "The Humor of Christ"... by, some of the sharing there.

Lennox Fisher asks, where do, where do, or can we... where can it be, Samoan humor be heard in the prophets and poetry of the Hebrew Bible? I certainly sense some honest sarcasm in these voices. And I know you've worked in Psalms and Wisdom in your academic work.

BRIAN: Yeah, I mean, I wish I had more time.

But certainly, you know, I've also written a piece on Jonah and the whale. And there's a lot of humor in that.

And so I think... it's funny that you say that, that you ask that question because a lot of Samoans are so drawn to that story. And it might be because of its, you know, you hear a lot of the moana in the, in the ocean in that story. And so it resonates with Pasifika people.

And, you know, those spaces contain a lot of humor for us. You know, there was the moana, the sea space. These are, these are, I mean, they're turbulent spaces. But at the same time they're spaces that generate a lot of laughter and humor.

But you see also in the story of Jonah that, you know, this very humor that we see, it's sort of, at the end. There's a lot of trauma for the prophet at the end of the... and, you know, we're left with this open-ended ending in the book of Jonah.

And, you know, you would know, Charles, that one of my favorite texts in the whole Bible is the book of Ecclesiastes. Another great text that you can see with the lens of humor, you know, especially when you put it in conversation with other conventional wisdom texts such as Proverbs.

You know, they're banging out the teachings of Deuteronomy. You know, if you do good, you get blessed. But if you do evil, then you get cursed. And then you get guys like Qohelet, the authorial voice in Ecclesiastes, saying, well, you know, I think that's, you know, that's, it's, that's not... there's not that a lot of, that's a load of... that's a lot of bull.

You know, you know, you read up to 8:14 of Ecclesiastes and he says, "oh, I've seen a world that's far different from that." And so, you know, this, this whole Deuteronomy theology is just, you know, it's not right. We see people that are, that are doing good. I mean, that are doing good works, that are not being blessed. And we see people doing evil that are being blessed.

Enter, you know, the story of Job is, again, this pious man who, you know, and a lot of humor in that story as well, who, you know, not only offers sacrifices, but offers sacrifices in advance, just in case his children sin, which is, to me quite a funny thing. So, yeah, sacrifices in advance. But at the end, he gets, he suffers. He gets, he gets cursed for being pious, so to speak.

And I think there's a lot of humor in those poetry and prophets. But obviously, if I had more time, I'd probably try and dig it out some more.

CHARLES: Yeah, there's a lot there to mine.

So Janet Wootton has asked, the prophets and also Jesus used humor to dig at the injustices of their own time. If we released that humor, could we challenge injustices more effectively? Was that part of the suppression of humor by the colonists?

BRIAN: Yeah, I think... I really think so, Janet.

You know, I think when a lot of people... I mean, I've heard the phrase, I don't know where it came from, but it says sarcasm is the wit of... what, the smart people or something like that? There was something along those lines. So, you know, those in control probably don't like sarcasm as much as you know, as the rest of us.

And so, you know, when... I think that what wit does and what humor does is, it challenges those conventions in ways that aren't quite as, sort of, you know, aggressive as, say, like, a more upfront type of challenging of those injustices. But yeah, I think humor has a unique way of pushing that message across and then get people to think.

And I think Jesus uses that a lot. Perhaps, that's probably why Jesus wasn't crucified earlier than expected because he uses a lot of satire and humor.

Yeah. But I think, I think humor serves a really good way of dealing with the injustices in this world. And, that probably would have been another element in my paper that I could have opened up a bit more relative to what's happening in the world today.

But yeah, thanks, Janet, for that important question. It gives me a lot to think about.

CHARLES: Kyle Roberts has asked, will diaspora, by its nature, accelerate the work of decolonization? Or is that not necessarily a given? Is it possible that diaspora could reinforce colonial structures?

BRIAN: I think diasporic communities have a great opportunity. Because, you know, especially, like, if I'm using Samoan diasporic communities as a reference point, you know, they're in a context that allows them to be, to open up more.

You know, when you're living in a village context, you know, it's a traditional society, and, you know, the status quo is enforced by the village matai, the chiefs.

So the opportunity to voice any disgruntlement or any, you know, attitudes of resistance towards power and patriarchy is, you know, very limited because there are, you know, there

are bans and stuff like that are enforced. You know, possibly removal from the village. And, you know, kicking you off your own land is a, it can be possible.

So, but to voice your concern and your suspicion against traditional and cultural practices is much easier in diasporic contexts because you don't have those same frameworks. You don't, you know, it's a lot more free. And plus this whole exposure to other contexts and the way they can see issues and deal with injustices, it can influence our people in the diaspora contexts.

I mean, classic example is, you know, in Samoa, we had the elections a couple of years ago. And the drive from diaspora, you know, to out that previous government was so strong that they succeeded. And, you know, because they're... a lot of our people in the diaspora, they're exposed to these other attitudes of resistance and questioning, they were able to channel that energy to Samoan politics, even though they weren't legally allowed to vote.

So there's, you know, diasporic Samoans have a lot of opportunity to do that. But at the same time, you know, complacency, you know, if that, if that kicks in then, there is the, you know, the likelihood that some of those things that we're seeking to subvert might not actually be subverted at all.

And then there's a perpetuation of the colonial project all over again. So, I think, there's an opportunity that we need to take hold of, and we need the right people in place, I guess.

CHARLES: I want to close with one question that I think is really relevant to your reference to Jonah, and moana, and the sea.

Graham Adams has asked to what extent is blue theology having an impact, opening up new possibilities for interpretation, not only in terms of noticing humanity's connection with the sea, but in terms of pushing against neat boundaries, allowing for some creative chaos, reminding us that we're not the masters of the world, and so on?

BRIAN: That's a fantastic question.

And, you know, it's funny that you mentioned the Jonah paper, Charles, because it's what came to mind when I was hearing that as well. You know, when you look at that story in particular, there is a crossing of boundaries happening in that story. And, you know, in that story I was focusing on the agency of the whale or the big fish.

And what you happen, what happens there is God orders the great fish to go and swallow Jonah. But there's a lot to look at in that because we have Jonah crossing into the sea, and is in a total state of hopelessness. But this crossing that Jonah does into the sea space is somewhat of a colonial crossing because he doesn't belong there. He's not a, he's not a fish.

And so what we have is the great fish is given this task by God to go and swallow the great fish... to swallow Jonah, sorry. And he could be looked at as, you know, the great fish responding, because the great fish is the master of the sea space. I mean, God could have ordered anyone but felt that the great fish is the one that should be tasked with that task of swallowing Jonah, because the fish, the great fish is the master of the sea.

And in that moment, Jonah realizes that he isn't the master of creation.

As you know, we have, we often think of ourselves. Because the earth doesn't need us... humans, I'm referring to. I think if there were no humans in this world, I think the earth will thrive nonetheless. And you know, what that story teaches us is, you know, we need to humble ourselves and not think of ourselves too highly in relation to the rest of creation.

So, yeah, it's a very important question, and I appreciate it. Yeah, thanks.

CHARLES: Thank you, Dr. Brian Fiu Kolia for your time with us from New Zealand at a very early hour for you.

And I really appreciate how you have kicked off this conference and made us think about some things, especially humor, and given us some new directions to consider our Congregational reading of scripture and... thank you. Thank you for that.