

**COLLOQUIUM PAPER: GOD’S PEACE IN THE SAMOAN
CULTURAL CONTEXT**

by Misa Telefoni

Introduction

It is a privilege to be asked by Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi to address you this evening. Ever since Al Gore’s major blunder I have been wary of mixing politics and religion. When asked during the Presidential Campaign, “are you a Christian?” He responded, “Yes, especially the principle in John 16:3.” We all know John 3:16, but John 16:3 reads: “*And these things they will do to you because they have not known the father nor me.*”

I appreciated Professor Patu Hohepa’s presentation. He mention anthropologists and their unpopularity. Archaeologists and anthropologists are similar. The famous mystery author, the late Agatha Christie was married to an archaeologist. She paid them the ultimate compliment when she said how great it was to be married to an archaeologist: “the older you get, the more they appreciate you.”

Peace and Christianity – Why the Samoan Experience was not Typical

Samoan orators refer to the three greatest dawns in our history (Taeao o le Tala Lelei)

Congregational:	Mataniu Feagai ma le Ata	1830
Methodist:	Faleu ma Utuagiagi	1835
Catholic:	Malaeola ma Gafoaga	1845

I interviewed Cardinal Pio Taofinuu in 2002 in the course of preparing another Paper on culture and religion. He told me that introducing aspects of Samoan culture into

the mass (especially the ifoga) only served to make the “mass more relevant for our Samoan Catholics”. He added, “In no way did it impact on the integrity of the mass”.

Christianity was readily accepted by all Samoans. Our Paramount Chief Malietoa Vainuupo had accepted it in 1835 from Rev John Williams. The Christian God was unseen, as was Tagaloa Lagi. It therefore followed that Samoans should have equally readily accepted Christ’s doctrine of Peace and Forgiveness as well.

This was not the case. Indeed 1830-1900 were some of the most war wracked years – marked by civil wars and general unrest. There is a logical explanation.

No Formal Written Samoan – First Samoan Bible in 1870

When Malietoa Vainuupo accepted Christianity, there was no formal written Samoan. Our written language, following centuries of an oral tradition, owes its creation to Christianity.

The first Samoan bible was ready in 1870, but it was not until 1886 that there were sufficient copies printed for mass distribution. Language scholars still regard the 1886 bible as the best example of formal written Samoan ever.

It is not surprising then that Christianity as a concept may have been accepted in 1830, but Christianity as a doctrine of faith and a way of life could not be accepted until the bible was translated and read and understood by our people.

For this reason, Christ’s twin pillars of peace and forgiveness were not readily accepted until the bible was available to teach the principles as basic to Christianity. It should be noted that these are the Christian concepts of peace and forgiveness, the Samoan “ifoga” had already been in existence for many years, and I shall explain this relationship further below.

The Cultural Context of God's Peace

Tuiatua, in his Paper tomorrow, will articulate the four pillars of the Samoan cultural concept of peace:

1. harmony between man and the cosmos
2. harmony between man and his environment
3. harmony between man and his fellow man
4. harmony between man and his inner self – inner peace and harmony

Dr Onah has articulated the African concept of peace, Professor Patu Hohepa the Maori concept, and Father George de Costa the Hawaiian concept.

What is universally applicable to all these concepts is that peace as an idea does not exist in a cultural vacuum.

God's Peace also does not exist in a cultural vacuum. This is the main thesis of this Paper. It did not exist in a cultural vacuum in the time of Jesus Christ, in the Jewish cultural context of that time. It does not exist in a cultural vacuum today.

Do Samoans Possess God's Peace?

The best enunciation of God's Peace is from Paul the Apostle:

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God and the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds, through Christ Jesus.” Phillipians 4: 6,7

There are 3 main points to note. These points are important to my hypothesis made later in this Paper concerning the Samoan translation of this passage from Phillipians.

1. It is God's Peace – not of this world, we are not expected to fully understand it in order to experience it. It “surpasses all understanding.”
2. The Samoan translation of “surpasses all understanding” is “greater than any other thing” – “silisili lava i mea uma e manatu iai.” In the context of the fruits of the spirit – Galatians 5:22, this means God's Peace is the greatest fruit of the spirit.
3. This “peace” guards our hearts and minds, but only if we are in Christ Jesus. We are vulnerable unless we possess God's Peace.

It is clear that God's Peace is the condition precedent to any other kind of peace, at least in the biblical context. This is best described by Thomas Merton:

“We are not at peace with others, because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves, because we are not at peace with God”.

The answer to the question: “Do we possess God's Peace” is difficult to articulate. Margaret Thatcher always said that “If you have to tell people you are a lady. You are probably not a lady.” In this context if we need to ask the question – we probably do not possess God's Peace. This idea will become more readily understood when we look at the process involved in the Samoan translation of this passage.

Samoa Context: Filemu v Manuia

The Samoan translation reads: “*Aua nei popole outou i se mea e tasi, a ia faailoa atu o outou manao i mea uma lava i le Atua, i le tatalo, ma le faatoga, atoa ma le faafetai. O le manuia foi mai le Atua, o loo silisili lava i mea uma e manatu i ai, e leoleoina ai o outou loto atoa ma o outou mafaufau ia Keriso Iesu.*” Filipi 4: 6, 7

The Greek word for peace is “eirene,” from which the English words serene and serenity are derived. The obvious Samoan translation is “filemu.” In all other places in the bible eirene is filemu except two: Phillipians 4: 7 and John 14: 27.

This is a strong indication to me of two things:

1. The Samoan translators of the Bible worked with the original Hebrew and Greek texts, not just English.
2. They also felt “Filemu” was not a strong enough word to convey the meaning of “eirene” in Phillipians 4:7 and John 14:27. They wanted a more holistic concept of well-being that includes peace – hence manuia and not filemu.

I first stumbled on this when I wanted to do a Samoan version of a sermon on peace I preached in English to the Anglican Church. I was surprised to note the word was “manuia” where I wanted and expected to see “filemu”, and so I probed further.

Revisiting The Cultural Context of God’s Peace

After this analysis I would reintroduce this cultural point again with this illustration. The blessing of parents is crucial to any Samoan achieving peace, especially inner peace. If for some, especially some valid reason, such a blessing is denied a Samoan, that Samoan cannot achieve inner peace, including God’s peace.

This is the moral context that determines whether a person can subjectively achieve peace. A completely amoral person, or indeed immoral person, can achieve a form of peace. Killing an enemy achieves peace when the act of killing does not affect the killer’s conscience.

A Christian person cannot kill and must forgive. Forgiveness cleanses the soul and allows peace to exist. The Christian achieves inner peace through possessing God's peace within the soul.

The Ifoga denotes the cultural acceptance of an apology through the symbolism of removing the fine mat. I will now demonstrate this practice as its powerful symbolism cannot be appreciated otherwise.

This symbolism has been adapted with a powerful Christian message in the Catholic mass. Christ's teaching is incorporated in His (the Lord's) Prayer. Forgiveness from God cannot come without our first forgiving others. This is one of the cornerstones of God's Peace.

Gods Peace is Blood Bought

Jesus' last words to his disciples before ascending to heaven.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid". John 14:27

God's Peace is blood bought. Bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. It is every Christian's blood bought inheritance.

We must enjoy that peace in our particular cultural contexts for none of us exist in a cultural vacuum.

We do not need to ask if we live in God's Peace. Indeed by asking, it may mean we are not!

Thank you again for the privilege of addressing you this evening.

God's Peace be with you all

Misa Telefoni