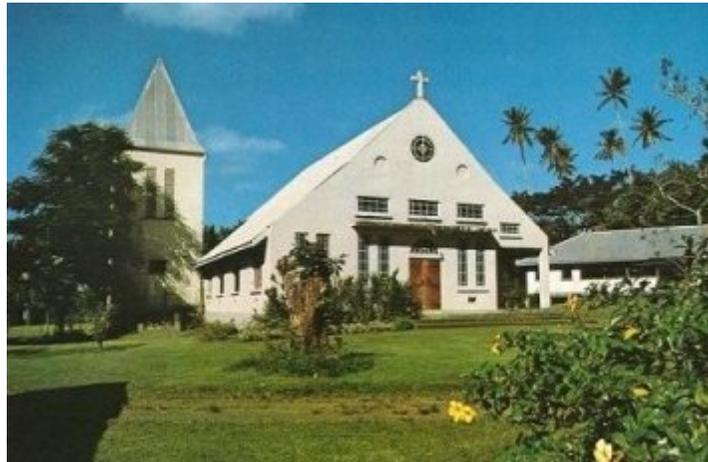


Samoa: A *Truly* Religious Place?

Views Toward Religion in Samoa



Angelica Saada

Rev. Featunai Ben Liua'ana, Advisor
Jackie Fa'asisila, Academic Director
S.I.T. Samoa
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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore the 'religiosity' of Samoa. Specifically, this study attempted to understand how 'religious' the average Samoan is, as well as examine the implications of being 'religious' in Samoa. It also sought to investigate the plurality of religions in Samoa, the existence of individuals moving between churches, and attitudes towards religious plurality. In addition, this study explored differences between the religiosities of younger and older generations and attitudes toward Samoan youth. Based on the results from interviews and surveys, it was concluded that Samoans view themselves and their country as 'very religious.' Being 'religious' is a vague concept but can generally be understood in Samoa to include aspects of spirituality, belief, and practice. Although Samoans place a high value on having a religion, one's religious denomination is of little importance. Such fluidity among denominations has allowed for the practice of young people moving between churches in Samoa. In addition, it was found that, while 'inauthentic religiosity' exists in Samoa, it may not warrant criticism.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AOG	Assemblies of God
CCCS	Congregational Christian Church of Samoa
LDS	Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormon)
LMS	London Missionary Society
NCC	National Council of Churches

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Samoa as one of the most religious nations has often been tossed around in anthropological writings, travel books, as well as in everyday conversation. With an initial look at white-clad parishioners walking down a church-studded village road on a Sunday morning, a traveler visiting the tiny islands may quickly assume that Samoa is a ‘very religious place.’ Indeed, since the coming of missionaries in the early nineteenth century, Samoans have appeared to embrace Christianity. Once an island of traditional religious custom, today nearly all of Samoa’s citizens are members of a denomination of Christianity or another non-indigenous church. However, can this high degree of church affiliation be taken as a reflection of Samoan religiosity? How ‘religious’ are Samoans and how is religion viewed from the Samoan perspective?

Background of Christianity in Samoa

Before answering such questions, one must first have a grasp of the historical and current religious situation in Samoa.

Christianity was first introduced in Samoa when John Williams arrived in 1830. As part of the London Missionary Society (LMS), Williams successfully gained converts and established a church that would later form the largest denomination in Samoa, the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa (CCCS).¹ Missionaries from the Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church were quick to follow Williams’ example. Not long after the arrival of the LMS, Peter Turner reached the Samoan shores in 1835 as part of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission Society.² Like Williams, Turner triumphed in his missionary efforts, causing the Methodist Church to soon rival the Congregational Church. Following the introduction of these Protestant religions in

¹Malama Meleisea, *Lagaga: A Short History of Western Samoa* (Apia: University of the South Pacific: 1987), 55.

² Meleisea (1987), 60.

Samoa, Catholicism made its way to the tiny island in 1845 under the direction of Father Foudaire and Father Violette, two French missionaries of the Marist order.³ After some struggles gaining converts, the Catholic Church eventually attained a stronghold, joining the CCCS and Methodist Church as one of the ‘mainline’ churches in Samoa.

Today, these three churches continue as the dominant denominations in Samoa. According to a 2001 survey performed by the Samoan Government’s Department of Statistics, Congregationalists comprise approximately 34.7% of the Samoa population, Roman Catholics represent 19.7%, and Methodists make up 15.0%.⁴ However, unlike the period of initial missionary activity, Samoa is now teeming with denominational diversity. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) has steadily grown in church membership since its arrival in Samoa in the late nineteenth century and now makes up 12.7% of the population.⁵ In addition, ‘minority churches’ seem to be multiplying and increasing in popularity. Such churches include denominations like Assemblies of God (AOG), Seventh-Day Adventists, Worship Centre, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. While varying in specific beliefs and practices, nearly all of these minority churches share a basic belief in God and trace their roots to Jesus Christ.

Research Questions

It is obvious that religion is very present in Samoa. But what does this presence signify? The first section of this study seeks to gain an understanding of the ‘religiosity’ of Samoa. Religiosity is used here to refer to ‘how religious a person (or a community) is.’ The scale used to determine a person’s ‘degree of religiosity,’ however, is dependent on how one defines

³ Meleisea (1987), 62.

⁴ Manfred Ernst, *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands* (Suva: The Pacific Theological College: 2006) 545.

⁵ Ernst (2006), 545.

‘religious.’ Thus, the first research question asks, “How religious is Samoa and what does ‘religious’ even mean here?”

Secondly, this study attempts to investigate the plurality of religions in Samoa. It asks, “How do people view religious plurality and what is the significance of interdenominational conversions or shifts?”

Finally, this study explores the differences perceived between the religiosities of younger and older Samoan individuals. Thus, the third research question asks, “Are there differences in the way young people view religion and religious plurality? Do public attitudes toward youth correctly reflect the younger generation?”

METHODOLOGY

The initial objective of this study was to determine ‘how religious Samoa *really is.*’ Yet after conducting preliminary research, it was clear that there were many biases associated with such an ‘assessment’ of religiosity. Before determining ‘how religious’ Samoa is, it would be necessary to define what ‘religious’ means, especially in the Samoan context. One would also need to have an understanding of the way Samoans perceive their own religiosity. Upon these realizations, the research goals transformed to include a much broader look at the way Samoans view religion. In addition, after an initial interview with a Samoan pastor, it became evident that there may be differences in the way the younger (versus the older) generation views religion. This, too, would be something that would need to be considered.

To explore these subjects, research methods sought to gain a range of Samoan perspectives. Six interviews were conducted with Samoan church leaders and theologians of various denominations in order to obtain a deeper understanding of Samoan religiosity. Questions were asked regarding: Samoa’s degree of religiosity, definitions of ‘religious,’

religious plurality and inter-denominational shifts, and trends among Samoan youth. One additional interview (asking the same set of questions) was conducted with a young Samoan individual.

Bilingual surveys were also distributed in Apia to forty-five Samoan individuals of various religious affiliations. Survey participants ranged in age from sixteen to eighty-two⁶ years and included similar proportions of males and females. The survey asked individuals to rank their own degree of religiosity as well as answer questions regarding the importance of religion, Samoan youth, and denominational shifts.⁷

Although there were constraints to this study—such as insufficient time collecting research, language barriers, and general difficulty discussing the topic of religion with individuals—the data from the interviews and surveys yielded a number of interesting responses and illustrate certain trends among Samoan views toward religion.

FINDINGS

Samoa as a “Religious Nation”: Samoan Perspectives

According to the survey responses of this study, most Samoans agree that Samoa is “one of the most religious nations on earth.” In fact, 91% of the survey participants agree that this is a true description of their country.⁸ What makes Samoans think their nation is so religious? Father Spa Silva, a Samoan priest based in Apia’s Catholic Cathedral, explains “Just look around. Church is everywhere. [...] The amount of people who actually enter church buildings—it’s really packed. People go out of their way, get dressed up, put a tie on.”⁹ Thus, just like an

⁶ Mean age was 29 years.

⁷ See Appendix for full list of survey questions.

⁸ 2% of survey participants disagreed that Samoa is ‘one of the most religious nations in the world’ and 7% of participants reported ‘I don’t know.’

⁹ Father Spa Silva, Roman Catholic Church, interview with author, Apia, 19 November 2008.

outsider might look at the outward signs of church activity as an indication of Samoa's level of religiousness, apparently so might Samoans. In addition to the church-going activity, Father Silva offers the fact that the nation's constitution is based upon Christian principles as another reason Samoa is a 'very religious nation.' Reverend Oka Fauolo, Chairman of the Samoa Council of Churches, agrees with the label, associating the nation's level of religiousness with its high degree of church membership. He explains that, in a recent survey, nearly all Samoan individuals have stated their religious affiliations, "And even those who are not church members, they have some sense of religiosity—in their thinking, in the mind."¹⁰ As Reverend Motu puts it, Samoa stands out as a religious nation simply because "Every part of life is connected to religion"¹¹

Other Samoan theologians, however, do not totally agree that Samoa is "one of the most religious nations on earth." They agree that, "explicitly," Samoa is a religious nation, but as Congregational pastor Reverend Liua'ana points out, this description applies only "on the surface [...] as far as the people believe."¹² Mercy Maliko of Piula Theological College questions the notion entirely, saying "Look at the problems affecting Samoan society—violence, abuse—is that a reflection of one of the most Christian societies?"¹³ With this in mind, she says she is often surprised to hear theological students offering prayers of thanks to God that Samoa is not like other "less religious places" in the world. Others agree that Samoa is a very religious place, but indicate that it is perhaps no more 'religious' than other nations. As Reverend Nu'u Siutaia points out "We are a religious nation, just like many nations in the South Pacific.

¹⁰ Reverend Oka Fauolo, CCCS, Chairman of the Samoan National Council of Churches, interview with author, Apia, 13 November 2008.

¹¹ Reverend Maauga Motu, CCCS, General Secretary of the Samoan National Council of Churches, interview with author, Apia, 25 September 2008.

¹² Reverend Featunai Ben Liua'ana, CCCS, lecturer, Malua Theological College, 17 November 2008.

¹³ Mercy Maliko, Methodist Church, sociologist, interview with author, Piula Theological College, 13 November 23, 2008.

[Likewise,] Hindu or Muslim nations are also religious, but Samoa is religious in the Christian sense.”¹⁴ Reverends Fauolo and Liua’ana both assert that Samoa is just like any country in the sense that its people are of all different degrees of religiosity.¹⁵

Overall, despite some disagreement among theologians, the majority of Samoans clearly esteem their island community to be ‘very religious’—specifically, one of the most religious ones in the world.

The Samoan Individual: Views Toward Personal Religiosity

Samoans recognize their nation to be very religious. But how does this translate on the individual level? In response to an interview question, “How religious is the average Samoan?” answers varied greatly and were often vague. Most church leaders agree that the average Samoan is indeed “religious.” As Mercy Maliko puts it, “They are Samoan. They believe. They go to church.”¹⁶ Others indicate that “There is a growing number of Samoans who are becoming less and less committed to spirituality and the idea of being ‘religious’.”¹⁷ Yet, what do the people themselves think of their own level of ‘religiosity’?

According to survey results, most—approximately 62% of participants—view themselves as ‘very religious.’ In succession, 24.4% identified themselves as ‘moderately religious,’ 8.9% said they were only ‘slightly religious,’ and a mere 4.4% admitted to being ‘not very religious.’ Even if the number of ‘less religious’ individuals in Samoa is increasing, they are still outnumbered by Samoans who view themselves as ‘moderately’ to ‘very’ religious.

Views Toward Young Samoans’ Religiosity

¹⁴ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

¹⁵ Rev. Fauolo (2008) and Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

¹⁶ Maliko (2008).

¹⁷ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

Samoaan individuals view themselves—and Samoa as a whole—as highly religious. But is there a distinction made towards young individuals? Several church leaders identify Samoaan youth as being less religious than members of the older generation. While he points out that many young people are committed to their religion, Father Silva, asserts that “The older people are much more firm in the expression of their faith.”¹⁸ Likewise, Reverend Fauolo, thinks “The older people are more religious,” reasoning that “they give up more childish ways that younger people indulge in, especially drinking, throwing stones at cars, and other ridiculous behavior.”¹⁹ Mercy Maliko also agrees that Samoaan youth are less religious than their elders, yet she emphasizes the roles that the Church and shifting culture have in contributing to this difference. In her opinion, the discrepancy between values held by the younger and older generations causes young Samoans to seem less religious. “Older people are more religious in terms of trying to continue values of Christianity [since] the Church presents values that identify with older people: respect, love, giving. [...] The strategies that the Church uses ignore the values of the young people.”²⁰ She explains that social change and modernization are the underlying reasons why young people have a new set of values and therefore cannot relate to the Church. In addition, because young people may feel that they cannot voice their concerns in the Church—especially in the mainline churches—they may view religion differently and, hence, hesitate calling themselves very religious.²¹

Yet, *do* young people consider themselves less religious compared with the older population? Surprisingly, on an individual level, more Samoans between the ages of 16 and 29 consider themselves ‘very religious’ compared with older Samoans. Approximately 69% of

¹⁸ Fr. Silva (2008).

¹⁹ Rev. Fauolo (2008).

²⁰ Maliko (2008).

²¹ Maliko (2008).

individuals in this age group—higher than the percent found within the entire survey population—classified themselves as ‘very religious.’ In comparison, 57.1% of participants ages 30 to 39 and only 44.4% of participants over the age of 40 stated that they were ‘very religious.’²² So, not only do young individuals consider themselves religious, but they tend to describe themselves ‘very religious’ more readily than older individuals.

However, when asked to agree or disagree with the statement “The younger generation of Samoa is less religious than the older generation,” 55.6% of survey participants agreed that Samoan youth are less religious.²³ And even though more than half the people agreed with this statement across all three identified age groups, the eldest age group (ages 40+) had highest percentage of individuals in agreement—approximately 66.7%. Thus, despite more young Samoans identifying themselves as ‘very religious’ compared to older individuals, many Samoans, especially those past middle-age, consider the youth to be less religious than the older generation.

‘Authenticity’ of Samoan Religiosity: Samoan Perspectives

Thus, in the eyes of Samoans both young and old, Samoa is a very religious place and that most Samoans are self-proclaimed ‘religious’ people. Yet are there any discrepancies recognized here among Samoans? Specifically, how do Samoans view the *authenticity* of the religiosity of most people? Do they think that all these self-proclaimed ‘religious’ individuals are *actually religious*?

²² For the 16-29 age group: 20.7% reported to be ‘moderately’ religious, 10.3% reported to be ‘slightly’ religious, and 0% reported to be ‘not very’ religious. For the 30-39 age group: 28.6% reported to be ‘moderately’ religious, 14.3% reported to be ‘slightly’ religious, and 0% reported to be ‘not very’ religious. For the 40+ age group: 33.3% reported to be ‘moderately’ religious, 0% reported to be ‘slightly’ religious, and 22.2% reported to be ‘not very’ religious.

²³ 33% of survey participants disagreed with this statement and 11% stated ‘I don’t know.’

Despite the difficulty discussing this subject among interviewees, most of the church leaders and theologians confirmed that there are, indeed, Samoans who are not as ‘religious’ as they may say. In particular, they affirmed that there are many Samoans who attend weekly church services and go through the motions of being religious but whose apparent religiosity is ‘inauthentic’. According to Mercy Maliko, “Calling yourself Christian is one thing, but being able to live it out in your life is another. You can’t become Christian in one day—only on Sundays.”²⁴ This impression of Samoan individuals attending church but not being ‘religious’ is reiterated by Reverend Liua’ana and Reverend Siutaia. They explain that many people in Samoa only attend church services because “It’s a legalistic thing. They do it because it’s a requirement.”²⁵ Reverend Siutaia says that “Most of Samoans just go for the sake of going,” or as part of their routine.²⁶ “It’s just part of being Samoan or being in a village. [...] Sunday you go to Church, Monday you go to school, and Saturday you go to the plantation.”²⁷ In fact, he feels that most Samoans fall into this category of ‘just going to church.’ Reverend Siutaia goes on to clarify what he identifies as the difference between said ‘inauthentic’ and ‘authentic’ religiosity:

There are people who call themselves Christians who have not accepted the sacrifice that Jesus has made, [...] that haven’t transformed. [...] There are Christian people who believe in their head, and then there are those who believe in their heart. That is the difference. [...] Even if you go to church, it does not necessarily mean you are Christian. People go to church for many reasons [...] But if you go to worship God, to acknowledge, [...] learn, [...] transform [...], then you mean business there.²⁸

²⁴ Maliko (2008).

²⁵ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

²⁶ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

²⁷ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

²⁸ Reverend Nu’u Siutaia, Apia Protestant Church, interview with author, Apia, 19 November 2008.

Descriptions like this, however, assume that there is a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ way to be religious, or rather an *authentic* and *inauthentic* state of religiosity. Reverend Siutaia, for example, implies that ‘authentic religiosity’ involves an internalization process. However, perhaps other Samoans would disagree with this definition. Thus, before looking into the question as to whether one is truly a ‘religious individual,’ it is first necessary to tackle what ‘religious’ even means, specifically in the Samoan context.

Defining and Redefining the Term ‘Religious’

This study has heretofore used the term ‘religious’ to describe individuals and countries as well as to compare generations of people. Yet, what does it even mean to be ‘religious’? Survey individuals were asked to rank their degree of personal religiosity in spite of the fact that there was no given scale or definition of ‘religious.’ So one might ask, what definition were they using?

Researchers have identified numerous dimensions to religiosity. Specifically, three main components have been identified to assess how ‘religious’ a person is: knowing (cognition), feeling (affect), and doing (behavior).²⁹ These three components are often thought of as religious doctrine, religious practice, and spirituality. When asked to define the term ‘religious,’ interviewees provided explanations that fall within these three categories. Interestingly, some definitions focus on one particular component while others touch on all three. For example, one young Samoan identifies mainly behavioral aspects as criteria that make one ‘religious,’ suggesting “Things like evening prayers—everyday, especially Sunday—and reading the Bible.”³⁰ Reverend Fauolo emphasizes both the importance of practice (doing) and doctrine (knowing) in his definition of ‘religious.’ He believes that a religious person is “one who

²⁹ M. Cornwall, S.L. Albrecht, P.H. Cunningham, and B.L. Pitcher, “The dimensions of religiosity: A conceptual model with an empirical test,” *Review of Religious Research* (1986), 27:226-244.

³⁰ Danny Motu, 20-year-old member of the CCCS, interview with author, Apia, 13 November 2008.

practices religion [and] believes in God and the Gospel. [...] He not only believes in God, but worships God, tries to avoid temptation and to become a notorious person—a troublemaker.”³¹

Likewise, Father Silva defines ‘religious’ as having to do with an “acknowledgment of” (cognition) and “obligation to” (behavior) a higher force.³² Reverend Liua’ana goes further to include “spirituality” in his definition. He states that being ‘religious’ not only involves following the practices of the Church, it means doing these things in order to “ensure blessings and life after death,” or doing them as a manifestation of one’s spirituality.³³ But the core of his definition is ‘belief’ since, in his opinion, even ‘irreligious’ people are religious in the sense that they “believe in the concept of not having religion.”³⁴ Of all the interviewees, however, Mercy Maliko proposes a definition of ‘religious’ that wholly encompasses all three aforementioned components of ‘religiosity.’ She refers to the “holistic being of a person,” stating that ‘being religious’ involves both external and internal processes of one’s mind, body, and spirit.³⁵

Yet, which of these definitions is the most accurate? As Mercy points out, there is no concrete definition of the word ‘religious.’ Religion is a “social construct,” which contributes to the ambiguity of its terminology. Thus, she maintains the definition of ‘religious’ “depends on context—the situation of the people you’re applying it to.”³⁶ People describe ‘being religious’ differently all over the world. Samoans, for example, have been “caged up in Samoa and not exposed to other religions” and therefore define ‘religious’ in their own way.³⁷ As mentioned by several church leaders, this Samoan definition is heavily reliant on the prevalence of Christianity in Samoa. Reverend Liua’ana explains that because most of the population is Christian, when

³¹ Rev. Fauolo (2008).

³² Fr. Silva (2008).

³³ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

³⁴ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

³⁵ Maliko (2008).

³⁶ Maliko (2008).

³⁷ Maliko (2008).

talking about being ‘religious’ in Samoa, one is referring to Christianity. “In Samoa, religion is synonymous to Christianity. Anything outside Christianity is not religion.”³⁸ The word ‘religion’ was not even part of the Samoan vocabulary until it was introduced by the early Christian missionaries, and so accordingly, it has become associated with Christianity.³⁹ Thus, as Reverend Siutaia point outs, although being ‘religious’ usually refers to having a set of beliefs associated with an ultimate being, in Samoa—as a Christian nation—this ultimate refers exclusively to Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

Yet, even if it is established that Samoans equate ‘religious’ with ‘Christian,’ the question as to how the average Samoan defines ‘being religious’ is still left open. To answer this, one can look at the differences in the way the self-proclaimed ‘very religious’ Samoans and the self-proclaimed ‘not so religious’ Samoans responded to survey questions. For example, both the ‘very’ religious participants and ‘not very’/‘slightly’ religious participants affirmed that they “Believe in God and the teachings of the Bible.”⁴¹ In fact, 100% of the ‘not very’/‘slightly’ religious individuals said that they believe. This indicates that, even though acceptance of religious doctrine may be an important aspect of religiosity to Samoans, more things are involved—otherwise all participants would have, logically, considered themselves ‘religious’ individuals. Major differences, however, were noted between the two groups in terms of religious behavior and spirituality. A higher percentage of the ‘very religious’ individuals acknowledged that they attend church services regularly, follow the rules of the Church, are involved in church activities, pray regularly, and read the Bible regularly compared with the ‘not

³⁸ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

³⁹ Maureen Sier, *Empowerment & Constraint: The Cultural Legacy of Indigenous and Colonial Religion and its Impact on Women in Samoa* (Scotland: University of Aberdeen: 2004), 5.

⁴⁰ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁴¹ 96.3% of the ‘very’ religious participants agreed. 100% of the ‘not very’/‘slightly’ religious participants agreed.

very’/’slightly’ religious individuals.⁴² Moreover, 66.7% of the ‘not very’/’slightly’ religious participants agreed that they “only go to church because they are supposed to.”⁴³ In addition, a much smaller proportion of the ‘not very’/’slightly’ religious individuals stated that they “think about their faith often” and “feel spiritual” compared with the self-identified ‘very religious’ participants.⁴⁴ Thus, it is apparent that when ranking individual religiosity, one’s religious behavior as well as religious affect, or spirituality, is taken into account by Samoan individuals. A Samoan definition of ‘religious’ might therefore emphasize elements of all three religious criteria: acceptance of religious doctrine, strict adherence to religious practice, and awareness of one’s spirituality.

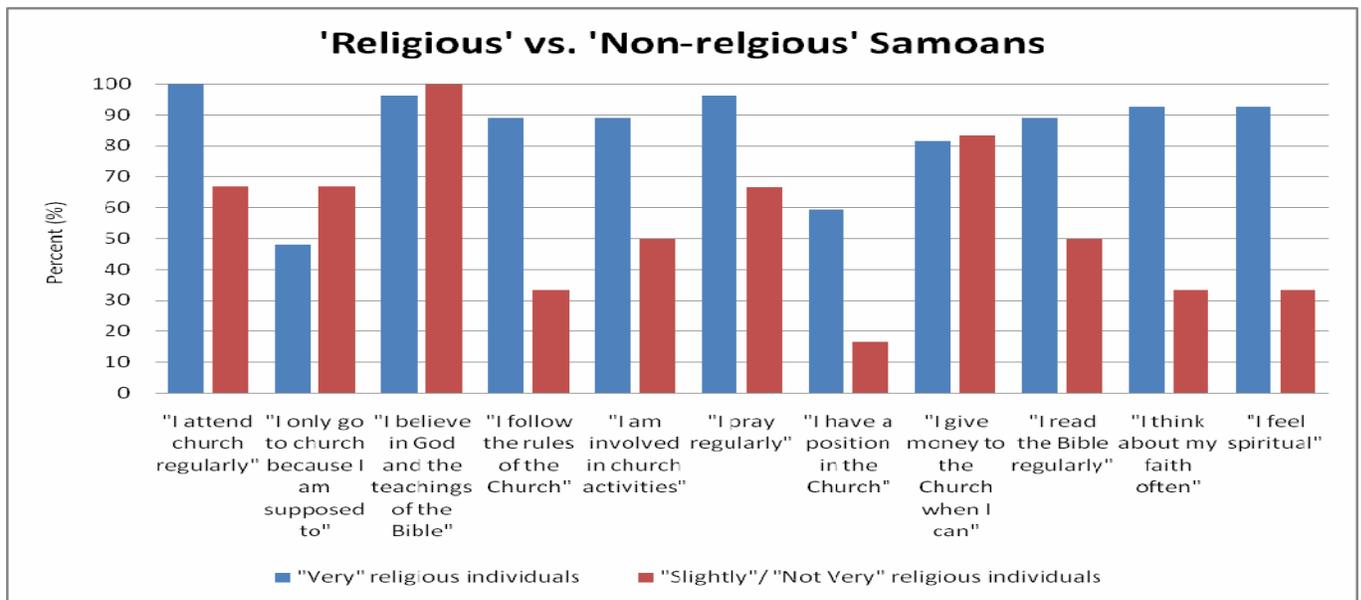


Figure 1. Survey results comparing ‘very’ religious and ‘slightly’/’not very’ religious individuals.

Samoan Views Toward Religious Plurality

⁴² See Figure 1.

⁴³ See Figure 1.

⁴⁴ See Figure 1.

According to the survey results, 91% of Samoan individuals think that it is “very important” for someone to practice a religion.⁴⁵ Yet, does it matter *which* religion? Samoa is not a country rich in multi-religious diversity—the only non-Christian religions are Baha’i and Islam. But it *is* a country rich in multi-denominational diversity. Out of the 45 surveyed individuals alone, eight Christian denominations were identified as religious affiliations.⁴⁶ So perhaps the more appropriate question is does it matter which religious denomination one practices in Samoa?

Several interviewees claim that one’s religious denomination does carry significance in Samoa. Even though he personally dislikes denominations, Rev. Liua’ana says that “Denomination *does* matter when you’re religious. [...] ‘Religious’ depends on your denomination.”⁴⁷ Mercy Maliko also recognizes the significance of denomination, rationalizing that “If [religious denomination] wasn’t a big deal, they wouldn’t have established theological schools.”⁴⁸

However, most interviewees argue that religious denomination is of little importance in Samoa. According to a young churchgoer, one’s religious denomination “doesn’t really matter” since it is only a matter dependent on the way you were raised by your parents.⁴⁹ Others recognize that most denominations support the same core religious doctrines. As Reverend Fauolo puts it, “We believe in God and Jesus. [...] This is not denied by the main churches. It’s the main factor of faith. The only difference is in the way we worship.” For instance, he talks about the way the different churches go about baptizing people. “That’s not important. What is

⁴⁵ 7% of survey participants stated that it is “moderately important” for someone to practice a religion. 0% stated that it is “slightly important” and 2% stated that it is “not very” important.

⁴⁶ Religious affiliations were stated as follows: 31% Catholic, 18% CCCS, 16% Methodist, 13% AOG, 9% LDS, 9% Seventh-Day Adventist, 2.2% Pentecostal, and 2.2% Peace Chapel.

⁴⁷ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

⁴⁸ Maliko (2008).

⁴⁹ D. Motu (2008).

important is God. We believe in the same God and in Jesus.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Reverend Siutaia holds that religious denomination does not matter—“as long as they’re proclaiming the Gospel.”

⁵¹ To him, one’s religious denomination is insignificant, provided that one is within certain standards of doctrine, or within the boundaries of Christianity.

According to Father Silva, most of the theological differences between the denominations are only noticeable among church leaders and religious scholars, not average Samoans. He says, “They’re just simple folks. We the clergy make it complicated by bringing in doctrinal matters of theology.”⁵² Interestingly, in an open-ended survey question asking participants to identify some of the differences between the major religions in Samoa, 35.5% of individuals expressed that there were no real differences between the different denominations of Samoa. In addition, 40% of individuals indicated that all of the churches of Samoa are rooted in the belief of the same “one God.” While almost half of the participants *did* identify differences in the religious practices, doctrines, or teachings, most of those surveyed stated that despite the different ways of worship, all the churches of Samoa are still worshipping the same “one God.” This reiterates Mercy Maliko’s statement that, “When they say ‘we’re all the same,’ they’re only referring to God. [...] They see the way you worship as not important.”⁵³

This concept of denominational unity under “one God” has led to a growing ecumenism movement in Samoa. Reverend Oka Fauolo points out how today, “Peoples have become brothers despite differences in religion.”⁵⁴ In particular, church leaders have taken initiatives to advocate shared spirituality by participating in the National Council of Churches (NCC). The council, although mainly comprised of leaders from the mainline churches, brings together

⁵⁰ Rev. Fauolo (2008).

⁵¹ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁵² Fr. Silva (2008).

⁵³ Maliko (2008).

⁵⁴ Rev. Fauolo (2008).

representatives from nine Christian denominations.⁵⁵ According to Reverend Maauga Motu, the General Secretary of the NCC, the purpose of the this organization is to bring church leaders and people together “to have a common belief in God, [...] to work as one family [...] or to work as unity under one God.”⁵⁶ Despite the different church practices, the churches that are members of the NCC all worship the same one God. However, some have criticized these efforts, claiming that it is unity “only in words.” According to Maliko, Samoans “promote ecumenism, but at the same time, they promote their own religion. [...] They reach out to one thing, but hold onto another thing. There’s always that competitive hidden agenda within the denominations.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, there is an apparent trend towards embracing denominational diversity. According to Reverend Liua’ana, “More and more people, especially the young people [...] try to narrow the gap between denominations.” Even though there are many small religious communities, he says that the barriers between them may be beginning to dissolve. “As you break down communities and form a larger community [...] you don’t see differences [between denominations].”⁵⁸

“Church Hopping”

Whether or not Samoans emphasize the differences between religious denominations, they *do* have an inclination for moving among the various churches of Samoa. Out of the survey participants, 18% admitted to having changed religions. As Reverend Motu explains, “Some

⁵⁵ The NCC has members from the following churches: CCCS, Catholic, Methodist, Protestant, Pentecostal, Nazarene, Baptist, Anglican, Congregational Church of Jesus. The Women’s Fellowship also has representatives. Rev. Motu (2008).

⁵⁶ Rev. Motu (2008).

⁵⁷ Maliko (2008).

⁵⁸ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

people, especially youth nowadays, seem to change from religion to religion.”⁵⁹ According to Reverend Siutaia, these people—or “church hoppers” as he calls them—aren’t exclusively young people, since older individuals sometimes switch religions too.⁶⁰ And while he is correct in saying that older individuals change between the denominations, it is clear that most of the people who have changed religions in Samoa are under the age of forty.⁶¹

According to religious leaders, there is a growing popularity among Samoan youth to move to denominations grouped under the umbrella of the ‘charismatic churches.’ These minority churches—such as Baptist, Assembly of God, Worship Centre, Peace Chapel, Elim Church, and Voice of Christ—are often characterized as the “clapping religions” of Samoa since their services of worship tend to include types of music, dance, and preaching that is much more ‘lively’ than those of the mainline churches. It is this aspect, theologians agree, that make young individuals move to charismatic churches. Reverend Siutaia characterizes the people who join these denominations as “youngsters who are crying out for something different—something more lively, more appealing.”⁶² Due to social change, globalization, and modernization, the youth of Samoa today have different values than their forbearers and therefore “find it hard to identify with the strategies used by the mainline churches.”⁶³ A student of Piula Theological College explains this trend among Samoan youth:

This religious development really attracts the youth because it coincides with their interest and lifestyle of today. [It is] appropriate for the social situations experienced in Samoa at the present. [...] Young people see the Mainline Church worship as boring and obsolete. It does not permit the freedom to express the feelings of the worshippers, for they maintain

⁵⁹ Rev. Motu (2008).

⁶⁰ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁶¹ 11.1% of survey individuals over the age of 40 stated that they have switched religions, compared to 28.6% of survey individuals between the ages of 30-39 and 17.2% of individuals ages 16-29.

⁶² Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁶³ Maliko (2008).

the value of silent worship. Because of this nature, the Mainline Churches are branded conservative.⁶⁴

As Reverend Liua'ana puts it, the young people of Samoa are moving to more charismatic churches in attempt to “re-contextualize” their worship.⁶⁵

The results of the survey support this apparent trend of individuals shifting from mainline churches to minority ones. Eighty seven point five percent (87.5%) of the participants who reported to have changed religions stated that they moved from one of the three mainline churches to one of the following smaller denominations: LDS, AOG, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Peace Chapel.⁶⁶ Interestingly, however, this shift from a mainline church to a minority church applied to individuals across all age groups. So perhaps it is the case that when *any* Samoan—young or old—changes denominations, he or she tends to move away from the mainline denominations. The younger generation may just be making this changeover at a more noticeable rate compared to the older generation.

Thus, individuals make shifts among the religious denominations of Samoa. However, what sort of 'shifts' are these? What does “church hopping” really entail? According to Reverend Siutaia, "There are two ways people can change: number one is the convenience part of it, number two is the internal part of it."⁶⁷ The switch to another church “can be mechanical but it also can be spiritual.”⁶⁸ Both types of shifts, he asserts, occur when people join the Apia Protestant Church where he is pastor. Father Silva also talks about the “internal” changes versus “surface” changes that can be present when Samoans move between denominations. He says that when some young people change churches, it is truly is a “metanoa,” or change of heart. But not

⁶⁴ Saunoua Sila, *An Image of a Samoan Youth in a Changing Society* (Samoa: Piula Theological College: 2001) 34.

⁶⁵ Rev. Liua'ana (2008).

⁶⁶ For full explanation, see Appendix.

⁶⁷ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁶⁸ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

always—“Sometimes it’s really an innate thing. Sometimes it’s really superficial.”⁶⁹ Whether or not a change in spirituality accompanies a denominational shift depends on the individual. However, whether or not there is a change in religious behavior seems to depend on which denominations are involved. According to Mercy Maliko, when Samoans change denominations within the mainline churches “it’s not really a lifestyle change.”⁷⁰ Reverend Motu admits, that for these kinds of shifts, it is “Only on Sunday is where you notice the difference.”⁷¹ When individuals move to a minority church, however, it is usually more of a lifestyle or behavioral change.

Still, what is the significance placed upon individuals moving between the different religious denominations of Samoa? Is it ever viewed as a problem? Several interviewees identified some negative aspects to individuals switching churches. For one, problems may arise within families if members decide to move to a minority church. In addition, a great deal of blame—between church communities, pastors, and individuals—can sometimes accompany denominational switches.⁷² However, according to most church leaders, little weight is given to individual shifts, especially when the shift occurs between mainline churches. As maintained by Mercy Maliko, when people change between mainline denominations they retain the same belief in God and so “as long as [their shift] is in the boundaries of the three mainline churches, it’s not a problem.”⁷³ Reverend Liua’ana asserts that, even among minority churches, the shift is still within Christianity. “Young people are not really moving between religions, they’re moving within Christianity.”⁷⁴ This reality has created a sense of leniency towards denominational

⁶⁹ Fr. Silva (2008).

⁷⁰ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

⁷¹ Rev. Motu (2008).

⁷² Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

⁷³ Maliko (2008).

⁷⁴ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

switches. Father Silva, for instance, says that “Overall, I don’t care where they go as long as it’s Christian. [...] I don’t make a fuss.”⁷⁵ He even finds reassurance in the fact that young people are changing denominations, because “it’s really a sign that they’re searching for the truth.”⁷⁶

ANALYSIS

How religious is Samoa?: A Re-evaluation

Despite the fact that most Samoans and many outsiders view Samoa as one of the most religious nations on earth, there has been criticism of its religiosity as a nation. “While the majority of Samoans are enthusiastic supporters of the modern church, and church attendance equals almost 100 percent of villagers, European observers have expressed some doubt as to the depth and quality of Samoan Christianity.”⁷⁷ In 1934, a disappointed missionary commented on the alleged lack of religious internalization by Samoans, saying “Christianity has changed Samoan theology a little, that is all. Otherwise the people are mentally arrested, there is no religious questioning or conflict—everything is easy going.”⁷⁸ Even Mercy Maliko and Afamasaga Toleafoa, Samoan individuals, have expressed criticism at the apparent disconnect between the way Samoans call themselves religious and the way they live their lives. For instance, Afamasaga wrote in a recent editorial “If Samoa is indeed a violent place, how might this be explained in the light of our preoccupation with religion and any thing remotely connected to religion?”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Rev. Siutaia (2008).

⁷⁶ Fr. Silva (2008).

⁷⁷ Lowell D. Holmes, *Quest for the Real Samoa* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey: 1987), 66.

⁷⁸ Missionary quoted by Felix Keesing in *Modern Samoa: Its Government & Changing Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin: 1934), 410.

⁷⁹ Afamasaga Toleafoa, “Of sacred cows and cash cows and violence in God’s own,” published in *The Samoa Observer* (2007), 2.

Yet, such criticisms carry no merit since they assume a universal definition of ‘religious.’ And, as established earlier, definitions of ‘religious’ vary from not only from culture to culture, but also from individual to individual. “Scholars continue to find it difficult to reach a generally accepted definition of religion. What one person/culture/tradition or academic discipline accepts as ‘religion’ may not necessarily be accepted as ‘religion’ by others.”⁸⁰ Even if one narrows the discussion from ‘religious’ to ‘Christian’ much ambiguity remains. Scholars have futilely attempted to determine what makes someone ‘more Christian’ than others. It is interesting that “Although Christians often employ exclusivist rhetoric, Christianity in general has been amazingly syncretic—to the point that authorities find it difficult to determine what a Christian minimally is.”⁸¹

Thus, one can only question the legitimacy of Samoan religiosity if taking into account the definition of ‘religious’ that is used in the context of Samoa. Yet even *that* is difficult to identify. Most of the aforementioned criticisms of Samoan religiosity imply a definition of ‘religious’ that involves an internalization of one’s faith. While the results of this study appear to indicate that most Samoans *do* identify an internal aspect to being ‘religious,’ it is very likely that a definition focusing on one’s involvement in church activities and adherence to church practices is a better reflection of the Samoan definition of the term. And if this is true, then one cannot blame Samoans for thinking they are a religious people.

Even if many Samoans do not seem to fit their own definition of ‘religious’—be it a definition involving belief, practice, or knowledge—can outsiders be justified in their criticisms? Or is it merely human nature for people to fall short of the own ideal religiosity? Lowell Holmes

⁸⁰ Sier (2004), 6.

⁸¹ John Barker, *Christianity in Oceania: Ethnographic Perspectives* (London: University Press of America: 1990), 11.

makes an interesting argument concerning the apparent hypocrisy of Westerners criticizing Samoans but not recognizing their own faults:

One wonders also about the readiness of Western observers to cast the first stone at a religious commitment which after 125 years of reinterpretation seems remarkably satisfying to the vast majority of Samoans. These detractors come from a society which makes token ceremonial gestures on Christmas or Easter along with vague claims about a belief in God but with little concomitant theological interest or knowledge to accompany that belief. Westerners invariably apply ideal measurement standards to their own religion and real standards when evaluating Samoan religious behavior.”⁸²

That is not to say that ‘inauthentic religiosity’ does not exist in Samoa. But maybe it is no more evident there than it is in the rest of the world.

Contradictions in Samoan religiosity may be obvious to observers simply because of Samoa’s existence as a publicly religious place. Unlike most other nations, nearly all of Samoa’s citizens call themselves Christians. This causes them to “look at religion as a public demonstration of faith.”⁸³ People in other parts of the world regard religion in a more private manner:

Not many countries proclaim this level of religious piety in public life, outside the fundamentalist Islamic states and the fundamentalist Christians in the US. [...] How many countries for instance have a week put aside by government for national prayers and fasting? How many countries proclaim unabashedly that it is founded on God, on Christian principles and on its cultural values?”⁸⁴

When religion is so highly publicized, any observed deviation from the religious ideal is naturally more apparent. This may be why Samoa’s degree of religiosity is called into question more so than other countries.

⁸² Lowell D. Holmes, “Cults, Cargo, & Christianity: Samoan Responses to Western Religion,” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 4 (October 1980), 485-486.

⁸³ Maliko (2008).

⁸⁴ Toleafoa (2007), 2.

Communalism, a key value in Samoan culture, may also contribute to the image of ‘inauthentic religiosity.’ In a place where family is revered highly and individualism is looked down upon, people will often act in certain ways to fulfill their duty to their family or community. As Reverend Liua’ana points out, in Samoa, “being ‘religious’ is about solidarity. It’s about being in a community.”⁸⁵ Even those who don’t feel religious will go to church and try to uphold the semblance of ‘being religious’ for the sake of their community. “Being religious in Samoa doesn’t necessarily mean perfection, but it does mean wholeness. [...] The community has to think the circle isn’t broken.”⁸⁶ Thus, “Sometimes it doesn’t even matter if you go every Sunday and aren’t committed [...] that’s part of being religious in Samoa.”⁸⁷ This aspect of Samoan culture may play a large role in creating an impression of ‘inauthentic religiosity.’

Overall, most Samoans view their country and themselves as ‘very religious.’ They define ‘religious’ as a state of being spiritually, mentally, and physically involved in one’s church. While it can be criticized that not all Samoans fit their own definition of ‘religious,’ critics must have an understanding of the way in which religion is incorporated into the Samoan value of communalism, as well as a realization that ‘inauthentic religiosity’ is a common occurrence in the world.

Religion for Religion’s Sake?

The results of this study indicate that the average Samoan perceives little differences among the various Christian denominations of Samoa. As a result, one’s religious denomination is of little importance and individuals move easily among churches. Such casualness has been understood to apply only within certain boundaries; interdenominational shifts are acceptable

⁸⁵ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

⁸⁶ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

⁸⁷ Rev. Liua’ana (2008).

provided that one remains within the boundaries of the mainline churches, or at least within the realm of Christianity. Most people agree that “if a person believes in Christ and worships God, it is less important how they go about it. [Yet they] extend their tolerance with more difficulty to people who follow non-Christian religions, to agnostics, and to atheists.”⁸⁸

However, even though Christianity is highly emphasized, there is the sense that religion *in general* is important to Samoans. The concept of not practicing a religion seems preposterous to most of the islanders. There were many instances, for instance, when individuals responded with expressions of puzzlement or laughter when the researcher stated that she did not really “have a religion.” Yet, as soon as a religion was mentioned—regardless of the type—things were deemed satisfactory. Even among irreligious individuals, the importance of having a religion was stressed. This leads one to believe that, in Samoa, there is a sense of having a religion merely ‘for the sake of having a religion.’ To the average Samoan, the act of merely ‘believing’ or of ‘having faith’ in something may be more important than what that ‘something’ actually is.

This kind of attitude might even explain why it was relatively easy for Christianity to come in and replace indigenous Samoan religion. Before the coming of Christianity, “A polytheistic and practical people, the Samoans were tolerant of the gods of other [people].”⁸⁹ Such tolerance may have stemmed from this notion of people practicing religion ‘for religion’s sake.’ Perhaps Samoans made for such willing converts because they found importance only in having a religion—but not in having a *particular* religion. Samoans today may share similar attitudes. If so, this could explain why new religious groups successfully move into Samoa and gain converts.

⁸⁸ Tim O’Meara, *Samoan Planters: Tradition & Economic Development in Polynesia* (Fortworth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston: 1990), 47.

⁸⁹ R.P. Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900: The Politics of a Multicultural Community* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press: 1970), 72.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A Changing Samoa?: Trends Observed in Samoan Youth

Although the majority of Samoans agree that the younger generation of Samoa is less religious than the older generation, the results of this study indicate that this is not true. The youth are no less religious than their elders. There is, however, a trend in the way Samoans make shifts between denominations. Young people, perhaps due to changing value systems, are changing between the various churches more so than older people. This trend may indicate that religion is becoming more fluid in Samoa. It is clear that religion still holds as an important value in Samoan culture, but adherence to a particular religious denomination, especially the historically mainline churches, no longer seems important. One may wonder what significant changes may arise from this change in attitude, especially in the context of globalization. As outside, non-Christian religions enter the sphere of Samoan society, it will be interesting to observe the response of the youth.

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