

Fall 2010

Persecution of Religious Minorities in Samoa: The Bahá'ís Struggle to Face a Common Problem

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Persecution of Religious Minorities in Samoa: The Bahá'ís Struggle to Face a Common Problem

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S.I.T. Samoa, Fall 2010



Abstract

The aim of this research is to determine the prevalence of religious persecution and examine how minority religions, particularly within the Bahá'í Faith, have experienced it in Samoa. Case studies from the Bahá'í and research looking at prominent stories of persecution will demonstrate the overarching problem that a lack of religious freedom presents in Samoa for minority religions. Understanding Samoans' perceptions of religious persecution will be gleaned from the survey portion of the research. Finally, the paper will yield some ideas for improvement in looking at the future of the Bahá'í Faith and religious freedom in Samoa. In addition to the survey, the researcher conducted interviews with Bahá'í which were used as case studies, review of public government documents and newspapers, as well as researched geared toward the faith itself by way of the internet and documents provided by the Bahá'í Temple.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who interrupted their busy lives to talk with and help me through this process.

Special thanks to the following people:

Thank you Karen for opening your arms and making me feel so welcome the very first day as well as introducing me to the charming and genuinely kind people who surround you at the Bahá'í Temple.

Thank you Silao for always being able to make me smile and for graciously translating numerous revisions to my survey.

Thank you Jackie for dedicating so much of your time and effort to guiding and challenging us throughout this semester. Your biting sense of humor that kept me both entertained and in line will be forever remembered and cherished.

Thank you to Hannah for keeping me sane.

And a final thank you to my mom who encouraged me to come on this trip in the first place.

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Background: The Constitution and Samoan Law

In order to fully understand the rights that religious persecution in Samoa violates, one must first turn to the Constitution of Samoa and the other legal principles under which Samoa operates.

The Constitution of the Independent State of Western Samoa (1960) states the following with regard to religious freedom in Article 11:

“(1) Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in a community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

But is there is a difference between theory and practice? The interpretation of laws made by the Samoan government, the practices of the *fa'amatai* and values inherent in the *fa'asamoa* has put Samoan society in a state of conflict and uncover hypocrisy. Though these may seem to be contradictory outcomes, they are both nevertheless present in Samoa's cumulative forms of government. In village politics it is the *matai* who rule. *Matai* are chosen by their family or another deciding body often in acknowledgement of their contributions to the family or group. The group of *matai* in a village then make up the village governmental council called the *fono*. Their power, however, is in no way reflected in the relatively small groups they usually work in. Afamasaga Toleafoa described Samoa's hierarchical governance as what Samoans see in terms of import: "the *aiga* [the family] is the most important group, then you've got the village, then you've got the church, then you've got the nation" (Percival 2008). Though in theory the constitution reigns over all other doctrines, this hierarchical reality in the actual culture of Samoa, suggests that the laws of basic human rights may not always be the highest priorities. A look at part two of Article 11, accounts for this possibility:

(2) Nothing in clause (1) shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law in so far as that existing law or the law so made imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred under the provisions of that clause in the interests of national security or of public order, health or morals, or for protecting the rights and freedom of others, including their rights and freedom to observe and practice their religion without the unsolicited interference of members of other religions.

In essence, this section allows for a violation of section one by the government or a village *fono* so long as the new law as helps the community at large. This was highlighted by the Village *Fono* Act of 1990 which gave the *fono* "(a) the power to impose a fine in money, fine mats, animals or food; or partly in one or partly in others of those things [and] (b) the power to order

the offender to undertake any work on village land” (Village *Fono* Act, 1990). In some of the cases examined in this paper the village *fono* may have ignored the limitations plainly set within the Act such as Article 11’s “Right of Appeal”: “every person adversely affected by a decision of a *fono* (including a decision as to punishment) shall have a right of appeal to the Court against such decision and the Court shall have jurisdiction to hear and determine the matter” (Village *Fono* Act, 1990). Some *fono* decisions seem to have regarded the section stating: “any act conduct or behaviour which is or has been traditionally punished by the Village *Fono* of that village in accordance with its custom,” gives them full reign to deal with matters of the village as they see fit because it refers back to how these misdeeds are customarily treated (Village *Fono* Act, 1990). Since it was passed, the *Fono* Act has been the subject of much debate and at the heart of many cases of religious persecution in Samoa.

This paper looks further into the outcomes of these differing governmental bodies when they come together in Samoan courts of law.

Introduction

Given the ambiguities and contradiction inherent in the laws and regulations described above, this paper looks at the turmoil that can result from the contradictory laws of the two systems: the government and the *fa’amatai* or *fa’asamoa*. The topic was chosen because of the seemingly endless cycle of persecution all over the world. There is still much work to be done on the topic so that peace between religions can be reached. It is especially interesting to look at the trend of religious persecution in Samoa because “social unity is an ideal state and Samoans will, where at all possible, avoid overt social conflict and division” (Macpherson and Macpherson 2006: 129). With this value in mind, it seems paradoxical that such disunity between religious cultures has

been so prevalent. The aim of this research is to determine the prevalence of religious persecution and examine the experiences of members of the Bahá'í Faith in Samoa. Stories of religious persecution from other minority faiths covered by the media will be a basis for comparison and will demonstrate the overarching problem that religious persecution presents in Samoa for minority religions. Survey data will be used to gauge Samoans' understanding and perceptions of religious persecution. Finally, the paper will suggest some ideas for the future of the Bahá'í Faith and religious freedom in Samoa.

Research Methodology

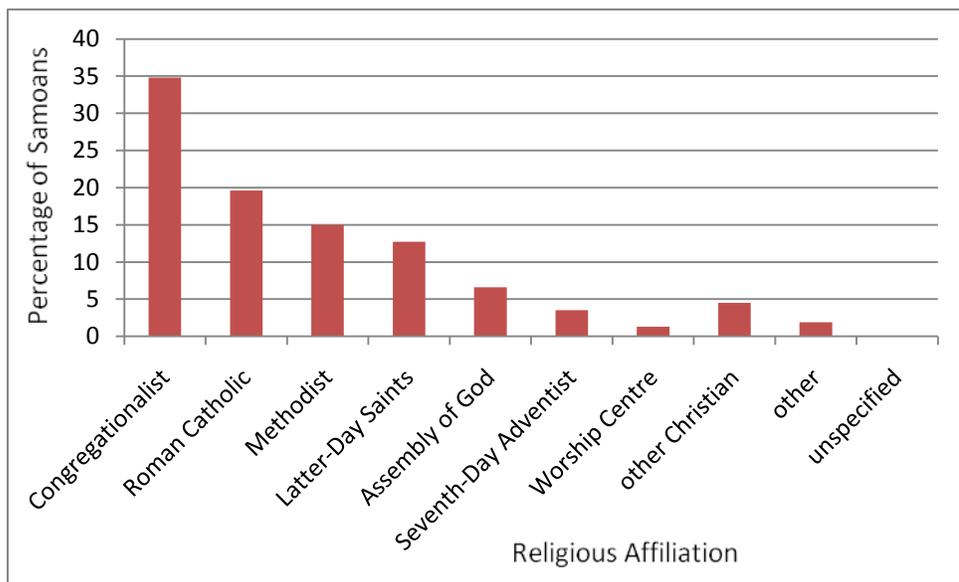
The paper required first-hand accounts of the persecutory acts from the Bahá'í which were communicated via interview. The questions asked in these interviews were aimed first at retrieving the stories and then toward learning interviewees' perceptions of why this happens and how Samoa can move forward. In order to explore the perceptions of the Samoan public, a survey was conducted to gauge the awareness Samoans have of religious persecution as well as their perceptions of whether or not it is a good to have religious persecution in their country. A trip to Salamumu provided the research with an avenue of looking into the ways in which a village evolves after a severe act of persecution has taken place. The library and internet served as the most prominent basis for finding secondary sources such as the court cases of minority church persecution.

Samoa as a Christian Nation

Since the arrival of Christianity with John Williams in 1830, Samoa has been a missionary's dream come true. The religion flourished and up to the present time people, as well as the government, have guarded their faith against outside views and successfully blurred the lines

between the separation of church and state. As Hon. Misa Telefoni says, Samoa is “a majority -- not all of us-- Christian; we exercise our human rights with Christian principles” (Percival 2008). His words were aimed not to point out that the human rights of other religions were ignored, but to congratulate Samoa for living under such respectable (“Christian”) doctrines. Nevertheless, he did voice a common problem in Samoa among minority faiths. With such a strong majority of Christians (around 98% of the entire population) the rights of minority religions, and for that matter, the individual, can often be overlooked. But, as Samoa stands now, with a very present variety of minority religions (see Figure 1), their rights can be ignored no longer.

Figure 1 - (IndexMundi, 18 Nov. 2010)



The three main religions in Samoa are all Christian sects: Congregationalist (34.8%), Roman Catholic (19.6%) and Methodist (15%) (IndexMundi 18 Nov. 2010). One or more of these religions will sometimes be designated by the *fono* or another local deciding body to guide the

village. This exercise of power over freedom of religion has resulted in many of the incidents addressed in this paper.

History and Background on Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith reached Samoa much more recently than these large Christian settlements. In fact, Bahá'ism is a relatively recently developed religion all over the world with its first notable beginnings taking place in Iran during the 1800's. In 1863, a man by the name of Mirza Husain Ali proclaimed himself an incarnation of God and changed his name to Baha'u'llah or "Glory of God." Baha'u'llah claimed that he had been chosen by the Báb or "the Gate," a descendant of Muhammad who had been executed thirteen years earlier in Tabriz because of the radical religious movement that he had begun in 1844. Soon after his proclamation, Baha'u'llah was arrested for the same thing and remained in exile until he died in 1892. During this period, he wrote *Kitab al-Aqdas* or "The Most Holy Book."

Today, the teachings of the Báb and Baha'u'llah are still read in Bahá'í gatherings along with passages from world religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and others. This illuminates one of the pillars of Bahá'ism: all the religions of the world are inherently the same.

Manfred Ernst provided these basic Bahá'í principals in order for outsiders to understand the philosophies Bahá'ís live their lives by:

- The oneness of the human race
- The foundation of all religion as one
- Religion should be the cause of love and affection, not hate
- Religion must be in accord with science and reason

The independent investigation of truth
The equality between men and women
The abolitions of religious, racial, political and patriotic prejudice
Universal peace
Universal compulsory education
A universal auxiliary language
Spiritual solution of economic problems
The non-interference of religion in politics
The equality of persons before the law
(Ernst1994: 29)

Before his death, Baha'u'llah named his eldest son, Abbas Effendi (1844-1921) his successor. Effendi was known around the world as Abdul Baha or "Servant of Baha." He passed on his responsibilities to his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and after Shoghi's death in 1957, the religion ceased to have a religious leader. Because Bahá'ís do not have a clergy or priesthood, the religious community must be governed in a different way. This organization takes the forms of small group meetings of nine chosen members of a ruling committee in a Bahá'í community.

Giving to the 'Bahá'í Fund' is obligatory, but the amount is voluntary and kept secret, unlike the larger Christian groups in Samoa, which read out the individuals' sums at the end of a service.

Persecution of Bahá'í

Persecution is not new to Bahá'ís. Even before Baha'u'llah came into leadership in 1852, an estimated 20,000 followers were slaughtered after an attempt at the murder of the shah (ruler) by a group of Bábís (followers of the Báb). The persecution in Iran, which continues to this day, has spread almost as avidly as the religion itself. This is not to say that there have not been restrictions of freedom within the religion: "Open expression of critical or personal opinions about the leadership, which is considered to be infallible, is forbidden, and anyone who breaks

this rule will be excluded from the community”; it is merely to explain that the persecution experienced in Samoa is the product of a long history of acts before Bahá’ism reached Samoa with an individual national assembly formed in 1970 (Ernst 1994: 31). Some of the stories of persecution from Bahá’is in Samoa illustrate this.

Case Studies

Kolini Tanuvasa- Tuesday, November 16, 2010, 11:45am, Rotomould, Apia

Kolini, now age 30, has been a Bahá’í since he was 18. He married a woman from a Methodist family. It is customary in Samoa for couples to live with one of the extended families. In this case, Kolini and his wife went to live with her family. When he got there he “saw their faces and heard what they said” about his Bahá’ism and from this, gathered that his religious views and practices were not welcome in their household. They specifically told him that if he wanted to attend his church instead of theirs, he would have to file for a divorce because it was not “fair” to the family if he remained Bahá’í. Being that he loved his wife, he stayed with the family and suppressed his desire to go to the Bahá’í worship. To get out of attending the Methodist church, he hid in the kitchen, cooking, on Sundays. When the family demanded a portion of the money that he had earned at his job in Apia, some of which went to the very church he went to such lengths to stay away from, he gave it to them. He stayed in this family for the sake of his marriage and kept a “low-profile” within the family to avoid conflict with its members. When asked whether the persecution stopped at words, Kolini smiled and said no. The interviewee did not make clear what action took place; all he would say was: “They [did] try to do something to me.” He lived with this family for three years.

Circumstances have changed in Kolini's favor in the last few months. A situation arose making it more logical for the couple to move out and stay with his family. They have been living there happily for several months now. Kolini says with a giddy laugh that he feels "free" now that he is able to practice what he believes in the open, where it is accepted by those who surround him.

One of the first things Kolini said to me was that his wife will always have the option of deciding for herself when it comes to her religion. Having gone through it himself, it has been deeply engrained that he does not wish anyone else to have the same experience. Perhaps it is having this experience where you are the ostracized one and are not comfortable all the time that will finally speak to everyone and let them know how unjust all of it is.

(For more on this interview see Appendix 1)

Tupuola Malifa- Monday, November 22, 2010, 3:00pm, The Coffee Bean, Apia

Tupuola converted to Bahá'ism in 1963 with the blessing of his parents. Beforehand, he had been LMS (Congregational) along with the rest of his family. Though they greeted his conversion with acceptance, "in their hearts there was hatred" (Malifa 22 Nov. 2010). He told the story of a family in Puleia, Savaii that converted to the Bahá'í Faith in the late 1970's. Soon afterward, there were several deaths in the family. The village quickly pointed out the correlation and explained the events as God punishing the family for their betrayal of Him. In reality, the deaths had been caused by lead poisoning. In order to more efficiently grind up cocoa, the family had attached a sheet of lead to the mortar they were using. Because the beans were hot, some of the lead melted in with the beans. Though this realization silenced the nasty

comments, the villagers would never admit their earlier proclamation as incorrect due to their pride.

Tupuola also described his personal persecution as a Bahá'í. He and several other Bahá'í representatives from Iran were invited to talk with some untitled men in an unspecified village who asked them to explain the teachings of their faith. Unfortunately, this infuriated the lay preacher of the local church. He came to the *fale* and ordered Tupuola and his friends to leave the village immediately with a threat on their lives if they did not. This was a man whom Tupuola had previously considered a friend. He tried to reason with him, but the preacher was having none of it. At this point, "I was doing something very unBahá'í," Tupuola confessed, "I hated his guts!" He and his friends had no choice but to disperse. Years later, when something bad befell the preacher, Tupuola looked on it as God's recognition of the sin the preacher had committed years earlier.

(For more on this interview see Appendix 2)

Mosi Pesa- Monday, November 22, 2010, 5:30 pm, McDonalds, Apia

In 1974 Mosi's grandparents converted to the Bahá'í Faith. It was a law in the village¹ that no one was allowed to change their religion. Once the conversion was made, his grandparents were no longer allowed into the village stores and were deprived of fresh water. In 1975, the village council decided to ban the family from the village. The family complied and moved into the forest where they were free to attend Bahá'í meetings in Apia. Upon their departure, their farm was destroyed. In the forest, the family's produce flourished. In 1977, a famine hit their previous village, and they were asked to come back with the understanding that they would

¹ Mosi has asked that the name of his village be left out of this paper.

change their religion back to that of the village. They held firm and refused. The village recognized their reliance on this family's food and allowed them back anyway.

Mosi then talked about the effects on his generation that these events had. In school, he and his siblings were treated like a lower class of people. They were always second priority and were teased incessantly. Though his parents still live there, Mosi said that he has no fond memories of this village. A memory of White Sunday stands out in his mind: He was twelve and his friend had invited him to the White Sunday service with him. As Mosi entered the church, an older woman grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and said: "Get this pig out of my church!" Whereupon she hit him as hard as she could across the back. It is clear that this memory is still painful for him to this day.

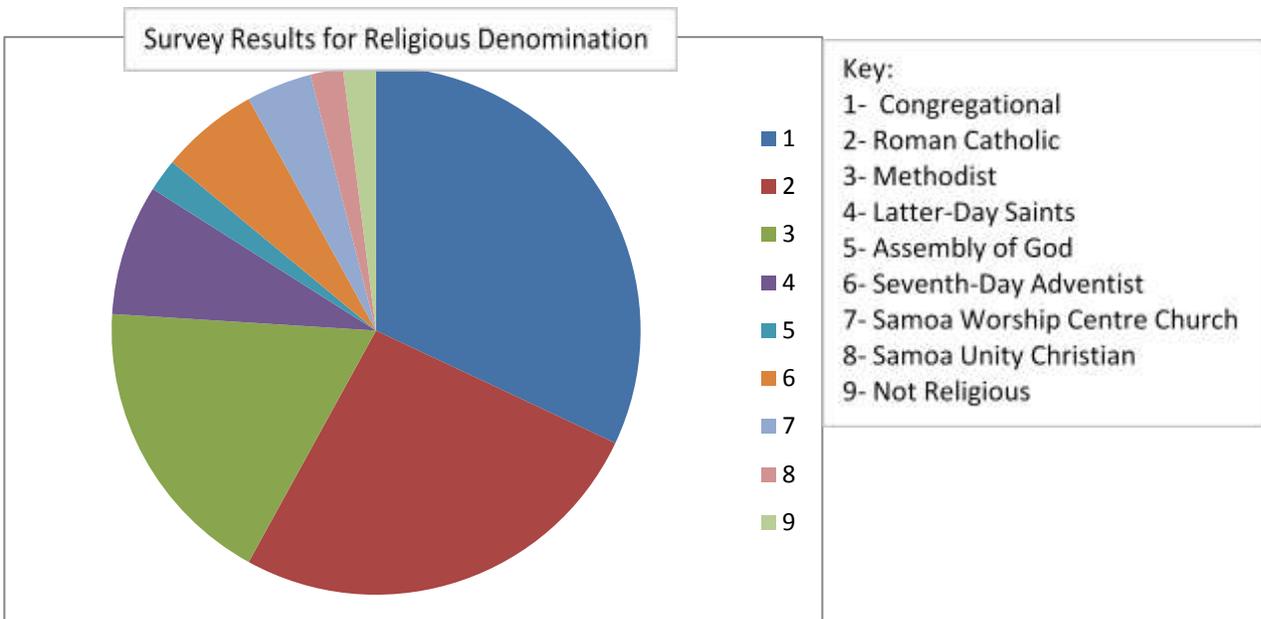
Recently, his mother has started a Bahá'í preschool with no fees which is open to the children of the village. Now the village can see the positive effects the Bahá'ís have on the village and they are no longer resentful that they do not follow the same teachings.

(For more on this interview see Appendix 3)

Public Opinion and Perceptions of Religious Persecution

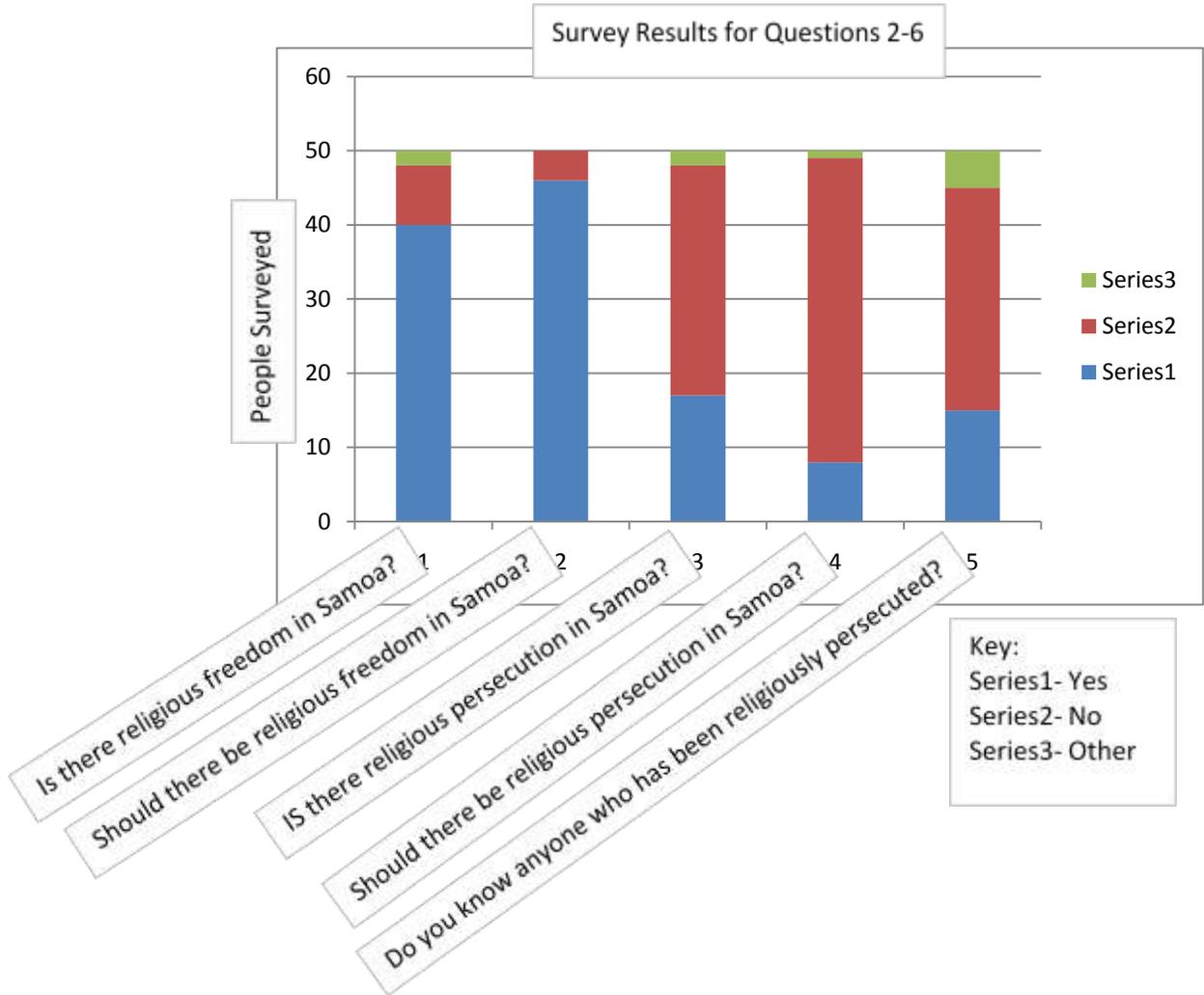
With so much of the religious persecution absent from the media one wonders how the average Samoan perceives the state of religious freedom in their country. A six question survey was administered to people from both mainline churches and minority religions. Figure 2 depicts the variety of denominations the survey covered (for the complete survey see Appendix 4). The randomly selected survey population (found in Apia and at the USP Alafua campus) matched the general population trends in Samoa with the biggest group of surveys coming from the Congregational Church (16 people) and with the minority religions having the fewest numbers.

Figure 2



The rest of the results from the survey are illustrated in Figure 3. The survey aimed to first find the perceptions Samoans had of religious freedom and persecution and then to see if differing perceptions correlated with church affiliation. The hypothesis was that people will be less aware of the lack of religious freedom and prominence of religious persecution if they are from a mainline church and if they have not personally known anyone who has been persecuted

Figure 3



The section labeled as “other” in the graphs is compiled of people who were either unsure or had unclear responses. Figure 3 shows that of the 50 people surveyed, 40 agreed there was religious freedom and 31 said that there was no religious persecution. The majority of people did not personally know anyone who had been religiously persecuted. This fact correlates with the overall lack of awareness (or lack of it) of the problem.

In analyzing the data, the surveys were divided into mainline churches (Congregational and Roman Catholic) and minority churches (all other religions present in the surveys collected). Figure 4 illustrates the awareness Samoans have of religious freedom and persecution in their country. The answers for Question 2: “Is there freedom of religion in Samoa” and Question 4: “Is there religious persecution in Samoa” are graphed for both mainline and minority religions in order to see if there is a correlation between these opinions and exposure to persecutory acts. If the person taking the survey recognized the problems of a restraint on religious freedom and the religious persecution that takes place in Samoa, the informants would answer “no” to Question 2 and “yes” to Question 4.

Figure 4

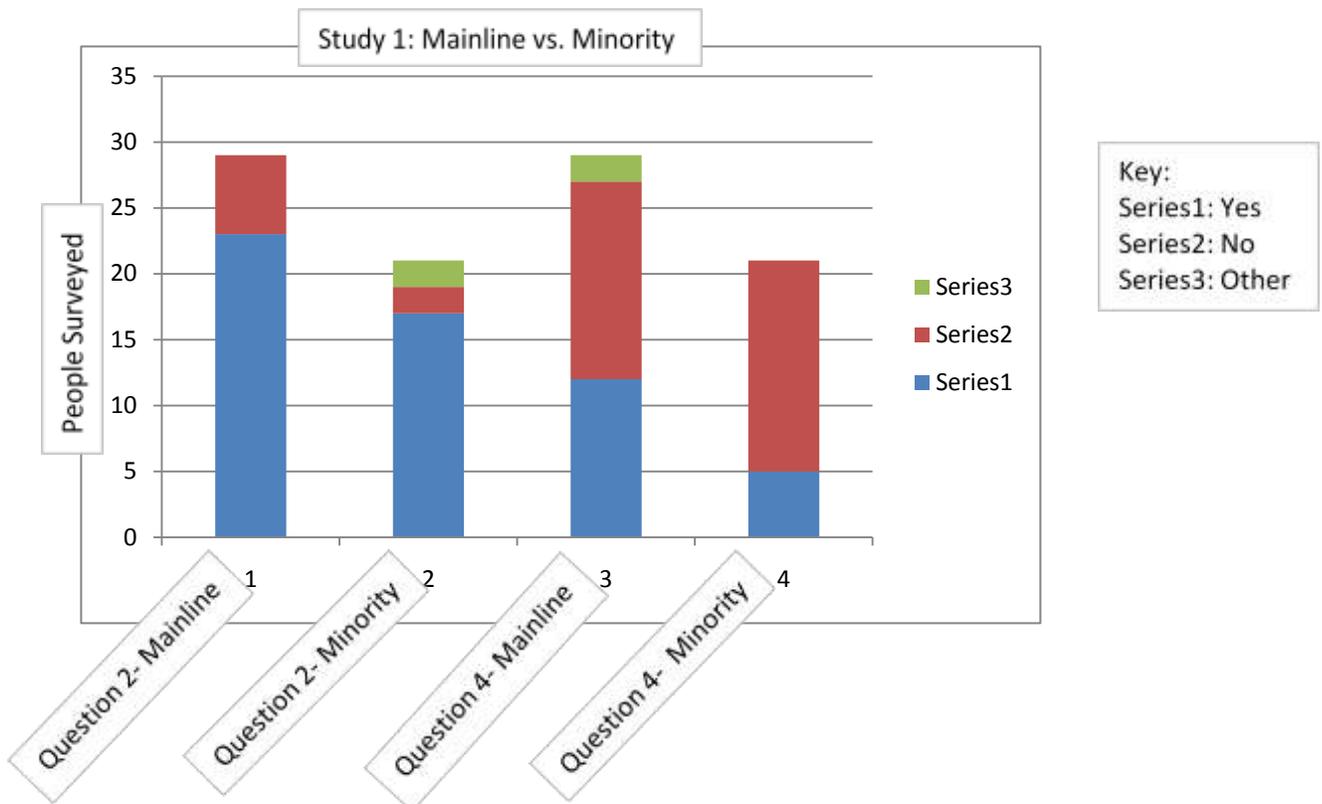
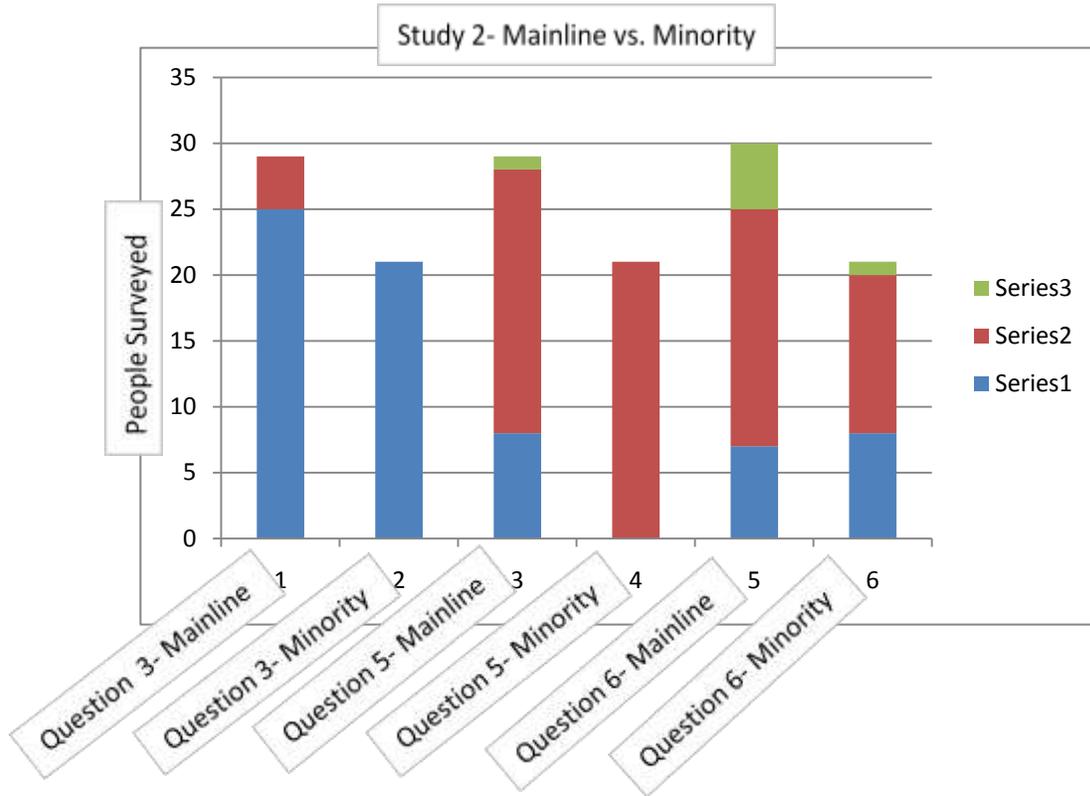


Figure 4 shows that 79.3% of mainline church informants and 89.5% of minority faiths agree there is freedom of religion. This data did not support the hypothesis that mainline churches were less aware of the breaches of religious freedom, both groups had high numbers of belief that there is indeed freedom². Results for Question 4 were similar. 41.4% of the mainline churches and 26.3% of the minority thought that there was persecution. This suggests that though many Samoans think there is religious freedom, the understanding of religious persecution is less widespread. In both questions, the mainline churches were more aware of the realities of Samoa, percentage-wise. This is hard to account for. It is possible that the minority churches have adopted the strategy of keeping a low profile in an effort to avoid attention and possible acts of discrimination.

Figure 2 presents the opinions people had on both issues and how these views correlated with their personal experience with religious persecution. Nearly all of the participants answered that there should be religious freedom. The four who did not agree that Samoans should have this freedom were all from mainline churches (see Figure 5). Responses to Question 5 (Should there be religious persecution?) indicated that 100% of the minority religions stated there should not be religious persecution. 27.6% of mainline churches stated there should be religious persecution. The final question (Do you know anyone who has been religiously persecuted?) showed similar results between both mainline and minority, but fewer mainline church goers who answered yes. 24.1% of mainline churches knew one or more people who had been persecuted, while 38.1% of minority religions did.

² Perhaps a question regarding the difference between the governmental sanctions and real life implications would have yielded more telling results.

Figure 5 (same key as Figure 4)



There are some discrepancies between what the informants said in the surveys and how the interviewees portrayed mainline church perceptions. From the interviews, one would infer that the clergy of the mainline churches would spread intolerance to their congregation. The survey data did not confirm this. With 25 of the 29 people from the mainline churches agreeing that there should be religious freedom, it is more difficult to make blanket statements about mainline churches having a negative influence on its worshippers' open-mindedness. One hypothesis to explain this inconsistency is to look at where the surveys were collected. Though people come into Apia from the villages to sell their produce, there is a higher concentration of liberal-thinking people in bigger cities as well as at Universities like USP where the rest of the surveys were collected.

Persecution of Minority Religions

Much of the persecution marshaled against the Bahá'í has been absent from the media. This could be due to aversion to rallies because of peaceful aims, smaller-scale persecutory acts that did not catch the media's attention or the Bahá'í becoming desensitized to constant subtle persecutory acts (Karen). Whatever the reason, Samoa has nevertheless publicized some events of persecution from other minority religions. The biggest of these cases will now be examined (see Appendix 5 for further cases).

“In traditional missionary Christianity in the Pacific culture calling into question one's religious affiliation was not customary” (Ernst 1994: 265). Unfortunately, time has changed this social reality in Samoa. One of the first questions people ask to make conversation is “What church do you belong to?” Based on the researcher's experience, this seemingly innocent question, if answered inappropriately or incorrectly to the listeners' ear, results in an easily felt discomfort in the beginning of the conversation.

The Bahá'í are not the only religious group that has experienced difficulties as a minority religion in Samoa. Only major Christian sects that started in the 1800's have been the fairly successful at avoiding scathing actions and remarks in their communities. They are now the major players in the religious landscape of Samoa. One example of the overwhelming power of mainline churches comes from a case of religious persecution in the village of Salamumu.

The case in Salamumu (1998) does not differ from the other cases we reviewed in this paper, in that the persecuted group was not necessarily a minority religion. The village of Salamumu was

founded in 1909 by a group of people fleeing from the lava that threatened their already established village on the Island of Savaii. The government granted their request for land on Upolu. Three churches were present at in this village at the time of the move: Congregational, Methodist and Catholic. Land was granted to both the Congregational and Methodist churches, but because of the low number of Catholics, their church did not survive the journey. Once the lava had taken its course and it was safe to return to the original village in Savaii, three of the four *matai* families did so. The family of Tauili'ili stayed. In this family there was only one Catholic man, the rest of the family being Methodist. Recognizing his overwhelming minority, this man left the village and so it came to be that Salamumu's designated church was that of the Methodist. The families that had gone back to Savaii returned to Salamumu permanently, but the Methodist church remained the only one. One *matai* from the village explained: (translated by Jackie Faasisila) "too many religions would show a division in the village; this would be bad for the youth." Things went along comfortably for a time. There were church related services on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the people of the village would do private prayer on the other nights of the week. (Percival 2010)

The first problems arose in 1998 when the village became aware of prayer groups and Bible studies going on at the home of Levaio Lamese. Though the family claims to have had these sessions since 1984, it was brought to the attention of the village in 1998 because of people coming into Salamumu from other villages in order to attend. The village attempted to stop these meetings, but they continued to grow by such numbers that the *matai* regarded these meetings as religious services though there were no bells rung or pastors present. In the Samoan culture, there is a tradition called "*tu le to'oto'o*" in which the *matai* of the village go with an

orator's stick (*to'oto'o*) to the house of a village perpetrator and asks them to leave within twenty-four hours. At this point in Salamumu, a form of this took place, but the *matai* were lenient and told the family that they must exit the village within a week. This was said on a Monday. On Saturday morning, the family had not yet dispersed and had continued to hold the Bible studies. Angered, the *matai* went to the Lamese house again and threatened that they would *mu le foaga* (burn the property) if they did not abide by their rules and leave. At noon the village came back and burned the house as they had promised. (Percival 2010)

The most notable disparity between the opposing parties is the issue of whether or not the Bible studies had resulted in the formation of a new religion. The *matai* believed that because the attendants of the study groups had forgone the village church sessions that they were no longer Methodist, but the representative from the persecuted family was quick to emphasize that the people who had started the study groups considered themselves Methodist up through 1994. The court case seems to side with the Matai on this disagreement. Indeed, in the court case it says that while Lamese used to be Methodist, "he later changed with his immediate family to a different religious denomination called 'Mau ia Iesu' or Gospel of Jesus" (Sovita v. Police).

"The Court's order was the latest in a series of judicial decisions in recent years that affirmed that all laws, whether statutory or customary, are subject to the individual rights provided for in the constitution" (Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2004). This means the court ruled in favor of the persecuted family and allowed them to return to the village. They were allowed to do what they wished with their property. Keni Lesa, a member of the family explained that one of the plots of land they owned happened to house the Methodist Church that had cast them out

so forcefully, but the family allowed it to stand due to his grandfathers wishes that the church be on his land. Only one cousin now lives in the five-bedroom house that they rebuilt after the fire, but Lesa says that after the ruling, the family returned peacefully to the village: “I love the village. It’s where I grew up” (Lesa 18 Nov. 2010). Though he speaks kindly of the village now, his feelings have mellowed since the actually event: “There were three guns in the house and if I had been there, they would have been used” (Lesa 18 Nov. 2010). “As members of Levao Lamese’s group walked out of the house they were assaulted. Four of them had their hands and feet tied up. Sticks were then put through their hands and feet,” and though the court case does not mention it, one of the battered women was pregnant and lost her child as a result (Sovita vs. Police) (Lesa 18 Nov. 2010). Thankfully the Methodist pastor stepped in before the people who were tied up could be burned (Percival 2010).

As an editor for the *Samoa Observer*, Keni Lesa has seen many cases of religious persecution in his 13 years working there. In looking at trends of persecutory events, he said that the amount of incidents has not necessarily dropped, but they have gone unreported. This is not due to governmental restrictions because as Lesa says, “we cover the issues,” but is most likely due to non-reporting or acts that are not grandiose enough to make a headline. Lesa contends that the number of churches in a village does not matter. A village can flourish with many churches. The Samoan way of thinking one day at a time is demonstrated here: for the quick solutions it makes sense to have one church in order to find quick and undisputed answers to problems. In terms of problems within a village, it does not seem to matter whether a village has one church or ten.

The biggest problem that Lesa sees is The Village *Fono* Act: “It needs to be clarified for the people using it” (Lesla 18 Nov. 2010). It is meant to “empower” the *fono* without failing to recognize that “it also confers responsibility and accountability” (Lesla Editorial³: 2). He likens the way the Parliament passed the Act to a father giving his ten-year-old son keys to a car without proper instruction. In his words, it is like saying: “Here, go kill yourself.” His overall question to the member of government who passed this act seems to be: “Why should the Village Fono Act, an instrument of Parliament that has far reaching and very profound...implications for the life of ‘ordinary Samoans’ be left to legally ignorant villagers?” (Lesla Editorial: 2).

Conclusion

On March 24th of this year, Samoa’s Commission of Inquiry met to review freedom of religion in Samoa because “government is concerned that there are other religions yet to arrive in Samoa which strongly advocate beliefs that are contrary to Christianity” (*Samoa Observer*, 26 Nov. 2010). The Samoan government is in the process of trying to amend Article 11 of the Constitution, and “although the exact nature of the Government’s planned amendments to Article 11 is at present not clear, it appears that it is intended that the freedom be limited so as to allow the restriction of new religions and denominations into the country” (HRLRC 19 Nov. 2010). It is amendments like these that the government tries to keep quiet until after election time because they know public opinion of acts such as these will not swing in their favor (Lesla 18 Nov. 2010). Perhaps this is the government’s attempt at reconciling the differences between its law and the village laws, but the amendment would seem to push Samoa in the wrong direction. There is definite importance in allowing the village governmental system some jurisdiction, but this

³ Date unavailable.

system should not be looked at and used as a model for the government. Whether they like to admit it or not, the Samoan government is under a microscope in many powerful nations, especially those who provide aid. If amendments like the one described above go through, Samoa can count on diminished support from the nations they rely on. As Carolyn Evans points out in her paper, the spread of religious intolerance in Samoa does not stop at its borders. She cites the following in her paper:

Despite the constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion and worship, village councils in fact sometimes engage in discriminatory behaviour, including the expulsion of people not sharing the belief prevailing in the village and the destruction of their property. -Abdelfattah Amor

This quotation, written by a representative from the United Nations should serve as a warning to the Samoan people of the negative publicity limiting freedom of religion would draw from a worldwide standpoint. It will only serve to “undermine Samoa’s international reputation” (Evans).

If the goal of restricting religious freedom by the government is to promote a mono-religious and therefore efficient body of people, it needs to rethink its position. A government cannot oppress its people into agreement, or the result will instead be “resentment and dissent among people who would otherwise be good citizens” (Evans).

According to Evans, “those who believe that their co-religionists should be able to worship and live in faith with their religion in other countries of the world, should ensure that their own countries respect religious freedom and non-discrimination principles” (Evans). This sounds like a fine maxim for those persecutors to incorporate into their lives, but if it were that simple,

Samoa would have solved their persecutory problems long ago. The roots of the problem are so deeply embedded in the cultural levels of Samoa that the differing reasons must be approached independently.

Reasons for Persecution

Though some may “dream up things to push their agenda” such as the “Church of Satan” that one panelist from the Commission of Inquiry claimed to be worried about, concern regarding the actual teachings of minority religions are not a major concern (Tupuola, 22 Nov. 2010). Slightly higher on the minds of mainline churches is the worry over losing worshippers to these smaller religions. This has more to do with the loss of resources that accompanies the move to a smaller congregation than it does with the loss of spiritual brotherhood. When a church loses a follower, it also loses their land, agricultural wealth and monetary donations. This loss of resources is coupled with the loss of governance the church feels over that person or family that has left them. Fa’aolo Utumapu, a reporter, considers this a misunderstanding by the churches: “People wrongly interpret human rights to mean authority...people must also understand that human rights have consequences and responsibilities” (Percival 2008). In other words, the mainline churches believe if people are granted human rights such as freedom to convert, they will not be governed by a responsible body; in fact, it gives people the opportunity to be responsible for themselves.

The Bahá’í Faith typically acquires followers by different means and for different reasons than the mainline churches. Many who are Bahá’í have converted from another religion whereas Congregationalists and Roman Catholics are usually born into their religion. This explains the deeper emphasis placed on spirituality in the Bahá’í Faith than in the prominent religions in

villages; the Bahá'í do not even need to attend church services to practice, but can pray in solitude (Koloni, 16 Nov 2010). The mainline churches look to religion as a way of bringing people together for social means. In this way, it is easy to see the ways in which these two schools of thought can miss each other in understanding the aims of the other. *Matai* see religion as a mechanism for unity in a village and for social progress. With everyone under the umbrella of one religion, it is believed that there will be stronger village cohesion and the village will be more efficient with everyone in agreement.

The Future of Samoa and Solutions

This idea that momentary agreement is best for a community will keep Samoa from moving forward. Forward progress of a community is reliant upon differing opinions so that it does not fall victim to groupthink. The upper class in the community (*matai* and church leaders) may appear to move forward, but the masses of villagers will be left behind in an ever-agreeing state of limbo. Here, this paper proposes that not only is it fine to have more than one church within a village, it is actually helpful in the long run for the community. Opposition creates a need for people to educate themselves on issues in order to back their opinion.

Education was the mentioned by everyone interviewed in this research as the most likely cure for religious persecution in Samoa. Education of the youth will provide a new generation that understands the ugliness of these acts. Education of *matai* will ensure that the message will be passed and accepted throughout entire extended families. Education of village *fono* creates a ruling body which not only understands its limitations within The Village *Fono* Act, but provides a fairer ruling system within the village: “Government must provide the infrastructure to support

this law and make it an instrument for the welfare of the people of Samoa. Otherwise, repeal it as it's serving only to undermine the overriding spirit of Samoa's Constitution" (Lesa Editorial: 3).

A revision to The Village *Fono* Act would also aid in Samoa's move away from persecution. Written documentation of deliberations and village laws should be mandatory. As the law stands now, it is not. Because there is no documentation, all appeals that are made against decisions by the *fono* are invalid. This "lack of accountability" which is "the weakest part of the Village *Fono* Act," essentially grants the village *fono* superiority to the law of the Samoan government because the law sponsors it (Lesa Editorial: 2).

The interview with Malifa pointed to another promising solution: involvement in communal activities. By coming together outside of a church-orchestrated activity, people can find common ground that is not directly associated with religion. Working together allows for unity and a venue for people to identify with others who do not necessarily share the same religious ideals.

It is of the utmost importance for the future of Samoa that people recognize religious persecution as a problem that cannot be tolerated. With these promising and easily executable suggestions for improving Samoa's currently prejudiced system, hopefully the people of Samoa will be able to keep their country on a path toward complete religious freedom. Though the government seems to be trying to model itself after the village system, Samoans must stand strong in opposition to this.

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Glossary of Terms

Aiga- Extended Samoan family

Fono- The ruling body of a Samoan village

Matai- A Samoan chief

Village *Fono* Act- A Samoan act passed in 1990 granting the *fono* jurisdiction over their respective villages, causing some confusion over how much authority actually came with the act

Fa'amatai- The way of *matai* or *matai* culture

Fa'asamoa- The way of Samoa or Samoan culture

Fale- A Samoan house

White Sunday- A holiday celebrated in Samoa within Christian sects that celebrates children

Appendices

Appendix 1: Notes from interview with Kolini Tanuvasa:

ZB: What do you think they were more upset about, your differing religious beliefs and practices or the fact that you did not conform to theirs?

KT: Both, essentially. Before he was a Bahá'í he looked into the LMS church. From this he knows that some Christian churches “will do anything to keep their followers” from leaving their church for another. Kolini gives his wife’s family the benefit of the doubt and says understandingly that “maybe they do not know” that God is at the center of his faith and “maybe that’s why they reacted” the way that they did. The other reason Kolini cited was a cultural one. With the high chief at the center of all decision-making, and as the head of the family, he is granted authority over all familial matters. By going outside the desired religion of the high chief (and by extension, the family) Kolini felt that it was perceived as a great disrespect to his superiors and simply “rude.”

ZB: In what ways did being a Bahá'í influence the way you handled the persecution you faced? Do you now feel anger toward to the people or the religion that persecuted you?

KT: Again, Kolini emphasized the way he maintained a low-profile by staying away from ugly confrontation with the people who wanted his conversion. He sometimes read scriptures and Bahá'í texts in solitude and respected the desire of the chief to discontinue going to Bahá'í services. Right now, he seems to be reveling in his new freedom and has no time for anger at either his persecutors or their faith and seems content to go his separate way now that he is able to do so. "I know it's life," he says wisely, "Christianity is not a bad thing." Understanding the consequences they will face because of their treatment of him is also something that extinguishes any lingering feelings of resentment. Their focus is not where he believes a person's should be: in his experience, Christian sects in Samoa are more concerned with keeping worshippers and acquiring new ones than they are with the teachings of Jesus.

ZB: Will you keep in contact with your wife's family?

KT: The couple and the wife's family are in contact every week. The mother is sick right now, so Kolini and his wife go weekly to say prayers for her. They do not dawdle, however. Kolini says they spend about 20 minutes there and then leave before the family can try to change his wife's mind about going with him.

ZB: Do you see any solutions to the problem of religious persecution in Samoa? Does the future look promising?

KT: True to form, Kolini the Bahá'í's confidence lies in education. According to him, the Bahá'ís must teach people how to love and respect all religions. He believes in not only spreading this teaching, but has such strong convictions about his faith that he believes all of the teachings of Baha'u'llah should be passed to people because if they understand they will recognize His as the teachings of the new age. He realizes the impracticality of everyone understanding and accepting the teachings and doubts that a younger man, such as himself, could have any real pull with elders, not to mention high chiefs. That is why, he says, "we must target young people" and have education on the tolerance of different religions instated in school curricula. The new generation may be our only hope at religious peace in the near future because even if people of the appropriate age and status were sent to speak with the elders in a village community it would be "hard to change their minds" even if they "show them love and honesty" (as Kolini suggests) because they are so set in their ways.

Outside of the classroom, Kolini emphasized the necessity of educating the chiefs: "It's not a fight between religions. It's a problem of the culture. The high chief will plan the activities of the family." Though he is quick to emphasize that not all chiefs suffer from ignorance, he says that it is the uneducated ones who abuse their power.

ZB: Did you feel any protection from the persecution coming from the government rulings or constitution?

KT: It did not occur to Kolini to look to his human rights in the confinements of the house he was staying. He was trying to show respect for the family's wishes while remaining true to himself, resulting in more of an internal struggle. During those three years, lost much of what made him a Bahá'í. He called himself Bahá'í, but the things that make someone Bahá'í such as reading the holy scriptures, praying daily and having full faith in Baha'u'llah trickled away from him over time. This is a dangerous reality. With such suppression, people who were once vibrantly devoted to their beliefs, begin to fit the very mold that they disagree with. As far as the law having an effect on his wife's family, Kolini had this to say: "only God will change their

ways.” The laws, though they may eventually learn to follow them, will not change what is in their hearts.

Appendix 2: Notes from my interview with Tupuola Malifa:

ZB: Why do you think persecution has taken place against the Bahá'ís?

TM: The government does not like the Bahá'í because it is in the teachings of the Bahá'í that they are not to drink. This in turn keeps money from the government that they would normally collect. Tupuola said that reason the churches did not like the Bahá'í is because they take people away from the congregation which causes them to lose revenue. In this way, “The social side has colored thinking toward Bahá'ís.

ZB: What does Samoa need to do now in order to move away from these acts of persecution?

TM: Tupuola agreed with his fellow Bahá'í that education is where the progress will be made: “If they are willing to listen, then there is progress. They can decide later that they do not like [the Bahá'í teachings].” Without education, people hear the name “Bahá'í” and immediately pass judgment on it and assume they will not like what the faith preaches. The second recommendation he made was to get people involved in their communities. Bahá'ís do many projects in their communities that work on social development. If the others in the village got involved, they would not only see that the Bahá'ís are good people, but the village would be working together toward a common goal which promotes unity between sometimes opposing groups

ZB: Do you find it unfair that some people seem to use the Bahá'ís graciousness for their own purposes while shunning them and their religious beliefs?

TM: “We cannot pass judgment on other people’s motives.” Tupuola said that it is not them that the Bahá'ís need to be concerned with because “as long as we do our work with absolute sincerity; things will come.”

ZB: Do you feel protected by the Constitution and other government rulings that allow for freedom of religion?

TM: He solutes the government for always looking to the individual for court cases. Even the Prime Minister, who is one of Tupuola’s friends, has had kind things to say to him about the Bahá'í: “If everyone was like the Bahá'í, Samoa would be a much more beautiful place” (referring to the work Bahá'í put back into their communities). In talking about the Commission of Inquiry, Tupuola pointed out the array of opinions presented. One man referred to his fear that the “Church of Satan” would soon come to Samoa. Though no one I have talked to has heard of such a church, this was his reasoning that Samoa should not accept more religions into the country. Another panelist pointed out that no matter if there was a group of people who worshipped Satan, it remains their choice within the constitution to worship whomever they like.

Appendix 3: Notes from my interview with Mosi Pesa

ZB: Do you resent the people who persecuted your family?

MP: Mosi said he regrets that the village took such vile actions against his family, “but that’s the way it is.” He seems at peace with what has happened and is trying to move on.

ZB: *How well do you think the governmental laws on freedom of religion work in Samoa?*

MP: Mosi believes that in an area like Apia, where the center of the government is so close, it works very well because people are monitored more closely, but he “can’t see the same implementation inside a village. In the village, they don’t read the paper” which keeps them from seeing the bigger government laws and keeps them in the mindset of working off of village laws only. This allows for village law to act above governmental law.

ZB: *Do you see any differences between the persecution faced by Bahá’ís and the other minority religions?*

MP: A change in Christian sects is much more widely accepted, Mosi said. The unfamiliarity is what scares people into acts such as these.

ZB: *What solutions do you see in terms of Samoa moving away from acts of religious persecution?*

MP: Mosi’s first suggestion was that people should get involved with “active service” so that “they can see the positives of” Bahá’ís. Then, he said, the government must teach all village councils “how to exercise different laws” because as of now they do not understand them and they do not want to understand. Though the people of the village are educated in other ways, they still look to their parents’ generation to see how they dealt with foreign religions.

Appendix 4: ISP Survey: Religious Persecution in Samoa

1. What religion do you practice? *O le a lau Tapuaiga o loo e tapua’i ai nei?*

Definition for Religious Freedom: The right to practice the religion of one’s choice (at home, in one’s village or in the country).

O le uiga poo le fa’amatalaina o le upu o le Sa’olotoga o Tapua’iga: O le aia tatau o le tagata e filifili ai le tapua’iga e fia lotu ai (i lona aiga, lona nu’u fa’apea le atunu’u).

2. Is there religious freedom in Samoa? *O sa’oloto Tapuaiga i Samoa?*

3. Should there be religious freedom in Samoa? *E tatau ona sa’oloto Tapuaiga i totonu o Samoa?*

Definition for Religious Persecution- To oppress, injure or afflict punishment on individuals or groups because of religious beliefs or practices.

O le uiga poo le fa’amatalaina o le fuaitau Sauaina o Tapuaiga: Fa’apologa poo fa’amata’u ma fa’afefe tagata, faia o ni fa’asalaga le talafeagai, fai ni fa’asalaga e fa’atiga ai i tagata.

4. Is there religious persecution in Samoa? *O sauaina Tapua’iga i Samoa?*

5. Should there be religious persecution in Samoa? *E tatau ona iai lea mea i Samoa o le sauina o Tapuiga?*

6. Do you know anyone who has been religiously persecuted? *Ua e silafia se tasi ua sauaina ona o Tapuaiga?*

Appendix 5: Religious persecution of minority faiths continued:

The case in Salamumu is certainly the most well-known religious persecutory case in Samoa, but there are several others worthy of note that are presented here:

Samalae'ulu (1997)

In March of 1997, Lupe Lio attempted to establish a Mormon church. His village was opposed to accepting another religion in their midst, but he continued with his course of action. In response, the village tied Lio to a stake and threatened to burn him. These actions were the result of a misunderstanding on the part of the village. They assumed that these actions were protected by the 1990 Village *Fono* Act and that they were merely following the regulations of it. (Macpherson and Macpherson 2006: 146)

“The Samalae'ulu case demonstrated that the state does not have the force at its disposal to enforce individuals' rights for any length of time in the face of determined opposition by a united village” (Macpherson and Macpherson 2006: 148). There is simply no way to keep villages from exercising whatever rights they may or may not have because of their seclusion.

Falealupo (2002)

“Villagers allegedly threatened to remove 40 residents for holding Bible study class in a ‘faith not considered mainstream’”(Bouma, Ling and Pratt, 2010: 183). The right to hold these Bible studies had been granted in 1987, but the village council changed their mind. The school that this group had built was burned to the ground and the members who were involved with it relocated to Apia. Though “in 2003 the Supreme Court declared the action of the Council as unconstitutional,” the group was not involved in the prosecution as they were trying to move on from the event in their new location.

Lotoso'a (2002)

Lotoso'a is an example of a case that allowed for only partial victory on behalf of the persecuted. The joining of an evangelical church resulted in the banishment of ten people from the village. The court ended up deciding that “the exiles had the right of religious freedom, but should hold their Bible meetings outside the village” (Macpherson and Macpherson 2006: 149).

Scientology (2007)

In September 2007, Scientology came to Samoa. The scientologists came under the pretext of leading disaster trainings. They set up stands in Apia, but after a few weeks, “hundreds of Christian believers in Samoa from Pentecostal churches and ministries...marched in protest against the government's support of the Scientology religion” (RNZI 4 Oct. 2007). After several months it was believed that the scientologists were in Samoa to promote their religious beliefs and the government asked them to leave.