

**ASPECTS OF SAMOAN
INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY**

AND

**CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

by

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INTRODUCTION

*“O fanau a tagata e fafaga I upu
O fanau a manulele e usu I fuga o laau.”¹*

**A Translation: The young of humans are fed with words.
The young of birds are fed with blossoms
(nectar) of trees and plants.**

Language is essential in any culture, for it is through language that the spirit and essence of cultures, myths and legends, are expressed, experienced, and lived.²

God is present in every culture, and every culture is able to express some truths about God to its own people. Traditional Samoans saw their culture as the basis and foundation of their understanding of how God had interacted with them. Culture is life, always changing and adapting. Cultural learning must have a good solid foundation and we see this in the elder/parent-child relationship in early Samoan society.

On-going cultural and social change in society highlights the need to understand the cultural and religious context in which we work as spiritual directors. As a Samoan, training in this ministry, I am interested to explore some aspects of Samoan indigenous spirituality and its contributions to Christianity and spiritual direction. I would also like to compare and contrast spiritual direction with the ‘peer and elder mentoring’ of Samoan indigenous religion and spirituality

In Samoan traditional society, the grandparents, elders and parents have the primary responsibility of “...*fafaga I upu*”, feeding (children) with words, 'the nurturing to being, feeling, knowing, doing ...'³ with *faaSamoa*, the Samoan way of life. The *matai*, village and whole community join in this on-going responsibility of learning and living as the young are instructed, directed and guided in cultural ways and values of respect and good relationships. It is here in the loving presence of family mentors

¹Tofaeona Tanuvasa Taavale p.3 #9, 10.

² Rev Humberto Ramos Salazar, Aymara Spirituality: A Challenge for Christian Spirituality p.2
Download 11/07/07 <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/whaat/jpc/echoes-16-08.html>

³ Filifilia Tamasese A Paper: "Samoan Customs & the Rights of Children"

that the children through their everyday life experiences began to learn and assimilate the message of culture and the living spirit of *faaSamoa*.

I came from a family where the “feeding with words” seemed to be unending, or so we thought as children. Looking back I valued and appreciated the learning and bonding received from my maternal grandmother, Mama Ake and some elderly women of our extended family in this upbringing. Examples are, the slight bow of the upper body and saying *tulou* when passing in front of people, or sitting down on the floor when talking to/at by elders, *matai*, pastor, or adult visitor. These examples and hundreds of others are forms of respect, *alofa* and good relationships, for *faaSamoa* is built on *alofa* on love.

The focus in all of our learning is on life – living and breathing the spirit, values and mores of our Samoan heritage and spirituality, as we continue to grow into other levels and relationships of our social structure and life.

1. SPIRITUALITY - A DEFINITION

Spirituality can be defined as a way a person lives his/her everyday life in view of his/her relationship to the gods/the ‘spirit’ world. It is “a mysterious inner force that animates a person’s life of faith, and moves a person’s faith to greater depths and perfection.”⁴

Spirituality is life expressed in solidarity, a communion with the whole of creation, the very life of a people, their history, stories of creation, myths, legends and culture. It speaks of their way of thinking (mentality) hopes, beliefs, values and aspirations.⁵

An important element of spirituality is prayer. Spirituality has to do with our experiencing of God, with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as outcomes of that experience.⁶

⁴ Alister E McGrath, Christian Spirituality. An Introduction. Adult Education and Formation. Download: 19/07/07 <http://www.stjohnadulted.org/spir-1.htm>

⁵ Rev. Humberto Ramos Salazar, Aymara Spirituality: A Challenge for Christian Spirituality: Download 11/07/07 <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/echoes-16-08.html>

⁶ Richard O’Brien in Catholicism p.1058 Download as in 4 above

From a cultural and religious Christian perspective, defining spirituality is necessary in order to explore the significant part it plays in the spirit life of a people, e.g. the Samoans in their personal and communal way of life.

2. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY and SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Christian spirituality is essentially life in the Spirit. It is the way one lives one's life so that it is easier not harder for God to enter into that life. Christian spirituality has a variety of forms, for example, a lay spirituality, a monastic spirituality, a Marist spirituality, a Franciscan spirituality. Christian spirituality is an awareness of our relationship to God, to self, to others and all of creation. It is a way of life lived and based on the values and teachings of the Gospels of Jesus Christ and in Scriptures.

Christian spirituality is the revelation of God in our most intimate being, it is our daily living experience of our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour who came to overcome death and will come again in glory.⁷

Christian spirituality is the quest for a fulfilled and authentic life that involves taking the beliefs and values of Christianity and weaving them into the fabrics of our lives, so that they 'animate' provide the 'breathe' and 'spirit' and 'fire' for our lives.⁸

Christian Spiritual Direction "is direction offered in the prayer life of the individual Christian. It is an art which includes helping to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in our life, assisting in the difficult task of obedience to these movements, and offering support in the crucial life decision that our faithfulness requires."⁹

Spiritual Direction is "holy listening, presence and attentiveness."¹⁰

⁷ Aymara Spirituality: A Challenge for Christian Spirituality p.3.

⁸ Alister E McGrath, Christian Spirituality. An Introduction p.3

⁹ Henri Nouwen, quoted in Andrew Dunn 1993, Oasis Brochure #3

¹⁰ Margaret Guenther, quoted in Andrew Dunn 1993, Oasis Brochure #3

“The experience in faith, hope and love that Jesus is my Saviour and the world’s and that I want to respond to him is the heart of Christianity and that heart is prayer and life based on prayer.”¹¹

Different social customs affect the ways in which human relationships are conducted, as can be seen in the Samoan traditional way of praying and encountering God.

3. SAMOAN SPIRITUALITY – SOME ASPECTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTIONS

a) Samoan Myths of Creation – Centrality, Life Force and Spirit¹²

Samoan spirituality is the way the Samoans traditionally lived their lives with regard to the world of the gods/spirits as they understood it. They believed in a ‘spirit’ world, which pervaded their physical world, and the gods manifest themselves in various ways in which they were involved in the daily life of the people. Therefore, the people had to be careful not to break any known *tapu* (taboos) of the gods.

The Samoan indigenous religion and spirituality are rooted in the Polynesian Myths of Creation held by the Samoan people. Myths seek to reveal truth, and for the Samoans these *tala o le vavau*, are important and their influences pervade the spirituality, mysteries of life, their understanding of God, creation, rituals and culture, and how they see the universe and the world around them. Hence, the need to revisit these myths of creation if we are to understand what breathes and animates the “spirit” of the spirit-life of the Samoans.

Space and scope of this topic put limits on detailed coverage in this section.

Samoan Indigenous Religion believed in the existence of many gods, and a Supreme Being whom they named *Atua Tagaloa*. *Atua Tagaloa* created *papa*(rock), the base and foundation stuff from which he created the world, the sea, the fresh water and the sky.

¹¹ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p.17

¹² Rev. T. Powel/G.Pratt/Dr F.Frazer, *Samoan Story of Creation*, Journal of Polynesia Society Vol.1. Download 30/07/07 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/polys/ssc.htm>

After creating *lagi* (the heavens) and *lalo-lagi* (the earth), *Atua Tagaloa* created *tagata* (persons) into living human beings of both male and female. He endowed *tagata* with his own Spirit, Heart, Will and Thought, and thus humans became living souls, with *loto* (affections) *finagalo* (wills) *manatu/masalo* (power of thought), *atamai* (human intelligence) with a physical and spiritual complex nature. *Atua Tagaloa* set forth humans as living spirits on the earth.

Traditional Samoans believed that they originated from the gods, *Lagi* and *Papa*, who were issues of *Atua Tagaloa*, their first ancestor and progenitor. *Atua Tagaloa* created the cosmos, the earth, all life forms including humans. The Samoans were convinced that their connections and relationship with all creation were rooted in their common divine ancestral beginnings.

In Pre-Christian Samoa, *Atua Tagaloa* was the name given to God, the Supreme Being, creator, progenitor – the God of the Samoans. The elimination of the term *Tagaloa*, expands the Christian theological concept of *Atua*, whom the Samoans recognized as Supreme Being, the same Supreme Being worshipped by the Christians. The *Atua* is not just for the Samoans but for the whole human world. The Samoans accepted the Christian explanation of God as the triune Godhead, because the Trinitarian doctrine was not entirely new to the people, who were aware of God, the Supreme Being revealing himself to them in more than one way – the creator, visitor, messenger, progenitor, *matai*, and so on.¹³

b) Pre-Christian Samoan Concept of *Aiga* (extended family), Values and Beliefs: Christianity affirms and Expands these Values and Beliefs¹⁴

“Spirituality is relational and is grounded in a healthy self-image, and grows within the context of life affirming and nurturing relationships.”¹⁵ Traditional Samoan social structure and organization of *aiga* illustrate this nurturing relationship in the life and spirit of Samoan society. “*O fanau a tagata e fafaga I upu....*” The children of humans are fed with words, ‘words’ which convey that solid foundation, that healthy self-image, life and spirit of a people; its living way of life – the *faaSamoa*. Family

¹³ Lolomilo Kamu, “The Samoan Culture and The Christian Gospel” Methodist Printing Press Apia 1996

¹⁴ As in 12 above

mentors take up the responsibility of guiding and directing them, as they continue to experience the wider perspective of Samoan life and culture. It is in the *aiga* and village community that young adults are exposed to the 'life of service' and 'the art of serving others' as this proverb also affirms '*o le ala I le pule o le tautua*', meaning the way to leadership is service. These two cultural values in Samoan traditional society are also values in Jesus teaching on service – Jesus, the 'man for others' who came to serve and not to be served.¹⁶

Traditional Samoan leadership emphasizes the cultural values of service, sharing and caring. This is intended for the *matai* and his *aiga*, where the *matai* is head and coordinator of the affairs of the *aiga*, and the *aiga* reciprocates and gives active support and service to their *matai*. The system works well if it's built on *alofa* and respect.

Christ's way and model of leadership strengthens the spirit of serving, sharing and caring in the *aiga* and community. Christianity expands the concept of *aiga* to include the world human family and Christ as head. Today's modern culture, not just for Samoa but the world at large, and its emphasis on capitalism, materialism and individualism, continually challenge these traditional and Gospel values and spirit. In the work of spiritual direction, the director could invite, encourage and challenge the practice of these traditional and Gospel values in the directee's prayer life and in the service of others.

c) Spirituality of Harmonies in Samoan Traditional Society : and Samoan Concepts of *Tapu* (taboo), *Feagaiga* (sacred covenant), and *Tuaoi* (boundaries)¹⁷

The Samoan indigenous religion holds that peace and harmony are spiritual elements at the heart of creation, hence the continual search for it, and the existence of established cultural ways and mores of maintaining and reinstating this unity and peace in the social and religious life of the Samoans.

In traditional Samoan society there exist four special relationships known as key harmonies :

¹⁵ Hamma R.A. Landscapes of the Soul: A Spirituality of Place p.19

¹⁶ Luke 22: 26 - 27

¹⁷ Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi: "In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion" "Physician Heal Thyself : Planning for the next Generation"

- ◆ Relationship between human beings
- ◆ Relationship between human beings and the cosmos
- ◆ Relationship between human beings and the environment
- ◆ Relationship between man and self

These four relationships constitute the “four key harmonies” for Samoan indigenous religion and spirituality in its search for peace and harmony. When each one and together of the four harmonies find equilibrium, then there is peace and harmony.

The traditional Samoan concepts of *tapu*, *feagaiga* and *tuaoi* are important in defining the types of relationships and harmonies in this equation of peace for Samoans.

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi attributed his personal experiences and self-reflections on peace and harmony for Samoans to the wisdom and insights of his ancestors, forebears and mentors! I would like to use some of the ‘fruits’ of his self-reflections and personal experiences, and the story of Tapuitema to discuss and illustrate further additional contributions of Samoan Indigenous Religion and Spirituality to Christianity and Spiritual Direction.

The ancient Samoan story of Tapuitema, illustrates for me relationships, disharmonies and restorations of peace, healing and harmony for traditional Samoans. Tapuitema was an earth-bound human female cannibal who fed on her siblings and relatives. Tapuitema was seriously reprimanded by her parents, and in obedience to them she gave up cannibalism and decided to make amends by promising to leave earth and ascend to the heavens where she will appear as the morning and evening star. From the heavens she will guide fishing and navigational expeditions, planting and other cosmic-earth related activities. Her story when told, reminds both the young and the old that Tapuitema was from the earth. That she broke *tapu*, *feagaiga* and *tuaoi* relationship, but was truly repentant. Her remorse and presence in the heavens as morning and evening star – a source of guidance for her relatives and kin, won her their forgiveness. Her story and message are still been told as a reminder of the importance of this balance of peace and harmony between humans, between humans

and the cosmos, and the importance of repentance and forgiveness, inner healing and peace in Samoan society.

Concepts of *feagaiga*, *tuaoi* and *tapu* relations are pivotal in keeping the peace and harmony between human beings. Disharmony happens when one of these concepts in relationships is broken, misunderstood, or not respected. The co-existence of attitudes of remorse and forgiveness, or the resorting to the *aiga* family disposition of *alofa* in their compassion and forgiveness, as seen in the ancient story of Tapuitea, can also help maintain peaceful relationships and harmony in Samoan society.

The harmony between brother and sister operates on the cultural sacred relationship of *feagaiga*, where mutual respect between brother and sister is expected. *Feagaiga* operates on all core human relationships in the family and in Samoan society. Peace and harmony exist when the sacred characters of these relationships are respected.

Feagaiga, this sacred covenant, has its roots in the principle that women have the gift of producing and nurturing life, and as child-bearers, women share divinity with the gods, the family gods. Women were seen as having the power as intercessors, peacemakers, family conciliators, especially in times of family or community conflicts. Christian prayers of intercession and petitions, and help from mediation of religious leaders, in this context have a much wider scope, a more freeing spirit and a greater outreach than the traditional relational function of *feagaiga*. Christianity extends the concept and moral value of *feagaiga* to include all of humanity.¹⁸

In justice issues, Samoan indigenous religion emphasized the value of restoration when seeking to restore family, community and personal harmony and healing. When *feagaiga*, *tapu*, *tuaoi* relations have been broken especially in serious crimes, as murder, adultery and rape, restoring harmony is urgent to avoid revenge. The Samoan ritual of *ifoga* is at the heart of restoring harmony, healing and peace when serious human rights have not been respected or broken. The family of the offender prepares the ritual of *ifoga*, (public act of humiliation) in the hope of receiving forgiveness from the victim's family. Often the spiritual pain of shame, guilt, and sense of contrition, are carried not just by the offender but also by his whole family and

¹⁸ Mainly - Acts. 17. 23

community. Harmony and healing can only be restored when the *ietoga* of the *ifoga* had been lifted, accepted, and forgiveness granted. The *ifoga* is the offender's active sign of penance and remorse. The *ifoga* still holds today for Samoa as a spiritual and public act of humiliation in restoring peace, harmony and healing between people and communities. Samoan Roman Catholics on special celebrations sometimes use the symbolic ritual of *ifoga* at the Penitential Rite in the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Mass.

Christian reconciliation is another easy transition for the Samoans, since restoring justice, peace and harmony between peoples, was already part of their religious experience. Christian forgiveness is founded in the love and mercy of God for sinful human beings, who are called to forgive. Jesus message on forgiveness is boundless. It is founded on love and respect for one another.¹⁹

d) Harmony Between Man and Self in Samoan Traditional Spirituality ... A Comparison with Christian Spirituality and Direction.²⁰

Humans as self-reflective beings and the harmony between man and self are reflected in the concept of *anapogi* and *moe manatunatu*, insights of traditional Samoans, offered on issues of healing the body, mind and soul. *Anapogi* (fasting, self-denial) and *moe manatunatu* (meditation – a dream dialogue with the ancestors, family gods), were traditional ways of disciplining and calming the body, mind and spirit to peace and so facilitate the inner self to reflect and assess freely.

Family mentors believed, that through the ritual of *anapogi* and *moe manatunatu*, peace of body, mind and soul, will follow. This will then help the inner self to reflect and converse with the gods, who will help them in making the right and appropriate decisions in the life of the family, village or community. This also applies to the self when praying for discernment or for personal spiritual development, healing and strength. This can be likened to Christian prayer of contemplation and discernment, or in spiritual direction where the director helps the directee in seeking guidance of the Spirit, and the will of God in decision making and healing of spirit. *Anapogi* and *moe manatunatu* have similarities to the Christian spiritual exercises of fasting, retreats, contemplation and prayer. Prayer in its many forms and practices is an

¹⁹ John 13.34

²⁰ Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi: "In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion."
"Physician Heal Thyself: Planning for the Next Generation"

important element in Christian spirituality, where one of its aims and purposes is for the self to meet, encounter, and dialogue with God. One of the purposes in Christian spiritual direction is for the director to help and guide directee to discern and find her way of encountering and relating to God in her own life experiences and prayer.

e) The Peer and Elder Mentoring in Traditional Samoan Society ...

The peer and elder mentoring in traditional Samoan is still valued today in Samoan society. It represents the heart and soul of nurturing relationship in the values of love and respect, a healthy self-image and cultural identity, bonding and stability. Learning through the process of personal mentoring, the mentee receives not only the knowledge of the mentor but also his/her *mana*, his/her spirit and wisdom.

The relationship between the director and directee is based on trust, respect and openness to the Spirit who works in both of them. The director listens and helps the directee in her learning, self-reflection and discernment, so to facilitate her encountering relationship with God through her life experiences and prayer. This is similar to the role and characteristics of the peer and elder mentor towards the mentee through the process of personal mentoring.

The directee has the willingness or desire to grow in the life of God, (the self searching for that inner peace) and be open to be guided as in the process of spiritual direction. Again some similarities, the mentee has the desire (if not already ingrained) to grow in the life and wisdom of a Samoan as modelled by the mentor. Both help self-reflections and personal experiences in the search for that inner peace (God) and self.

CONCLUSION

I believe Samoan indigenous spirituality positively contributes to Christian spirituality in making people aware of the pervasiveness of the divine presence in all of human life and activity. Samoan indigenous religion as in the Christian Gospels and Scriptures reveals God's involvement in human history. Here it is important to see one's culture in the light of the Good News and to see the Good News in the eyes of one's culture, the eyes of a Samoan. This brings me to a question. How in spiritual direction can I help and encourage a Samoan in this context, to go deeper

into her understanding of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels and to express them in her own way of life?

One of my Samoan friends commented that he once had a theory that the old religion is still alive in the Samoans under Christian labels. In spiritual direction, I see the need to be more open to the Spirit and be attentive and use the positive aspects of the traditional religion or cleanse its non Christian aspects in order for the directee to live in such a way that it makes it easier, not harder, for God to enter into her life as it is the way it is. Could this be an answer to the question I posed above?

Finally, in the Samoan indigenous religion, peace and harmony are spiritual elements in the heart of creation. And that Heart is *Atua*. The four key harmonies are each and together about human beings continual search for that inner force/spirit, which is greater than oneself, and reflected in Augustine's search "...for thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee."²¹ The emphasis is on the journey, our pilgrimage and searching. Spiritual direction and peer and elder mentoring are tools to help us on the journey so as to arrive at Harmony and Peace with God. For God is Harmony! God is Peace!

²¹ .St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, "Confessions" Chap.1 p.2.Download 01/01/97
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GLOSSARY

Aiga	family, kin and relatives; elementary family; extended family, household
Alofa	love, compassion, affection
Anapogi	fasting, self-denial and meditation
Atua	God, as revealed in Christ
Ie toga	Samoa fine mat; constitute the most valuable property of the Samoans
Ifoga	Samoa act of public humiliation and reparation to restore peace in human relationships
FaaSamoa	to act according to Samoan customs; Samoan way of life
Feagaiga	In Samoa indigenous religion – a sacred covenant, relationship between brother and sister; an agreement, a covenant;
Finagalo	a chief’s will or desire; to will, of chiefs
Lagi	the sky; heaven; customs observed at death of a chief
Lalolagi	the world; a part of the world
Loto	the heart, the desire, the will
Mana	supernatural power; to exert supernatural power
Manatu	to think; to remember; a thought
Masalo	suspicion, doubt; to suspect ; to doubt
Matai	the head of a family,
Matua tausí	a parent; elder receiving care and love
Moe manatunatu*	meditation; ‘a dream dialogue with ancestors and /or family gods
Papa	rock; solid; flat
Tagaloa	Traditional Samoa name given to the principal god – the Supreme Being; Atua
Tagata	man; human being of either sex, a person
Tala o le vavau	myths; legends
Tapu	to make sacred; to place under restrictions
Tuaoi	a boundary, a neighbour
Tulou	an apologetic word used on entering the house of a god; commencing a speech; to bow in respect when passing in front of people

- moe manatunatu : Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi reflects - moe manatunatu as a dream dialogue with ancestors and family gods, which is available to man depending on the spiritual levels attained in his processes of anapogi. Through moe manatunatu the gods and ancestors are able to assist, not only in decisions concerning the self but also in decisions relating to family and community.
 (“In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoa Indigenous Religion” p.11)

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My only regret in this essay, is that I couldn't do justice to even the aspects of Samoan spirituality touched on in its pages. Perhaps, this is the beginning for me, of an interest that would continue to grow, and develop like the roots of the great *aoa* tree (bunyan tree)!

I am amazed, affirmed and challenged by the insights and small discoveries dawned on me through this study, and the work done in this essay. It has reaffirmed my own appreciation of the marvels and presence of God at work in all cultures and peoples, as I now appreciate more the life, history, and living culture of our own Samoan people. And that it is okay to be an indigenous Christian!

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