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# A Public Theology Response to Domestic Violence in Samoa

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## Abstract

Domestic violence is a serious social problem in Samoa. Some studies have suggested that nearly half of Samoan women have been subject to abuse by intimate partners or parents. The increase in cases of domestic violence in Samoa is slowly raising the public's awareness of its impacts on the victims, who are overwhelmingly women and children. The growing number of named cases of domestic violence, and many other cases, which are not reported, should make domestic violence a priority issue in theological reflection. This article explores how this pressing issue of domestic violence in Samoa may be seen as a case study for an Oceanic public theology.

## Keywords

Domestic violence – public theology – Samoan core values

## Domestic Violence in Samoa

Domestic violence in the Samoan context in this article refers to violence and abuse committed by males against their female intimate partners. (It does not address the equally serious problem of child abuse.) Statistics presented by the World Health Organization indicate that women in Samoa experience both physical abuse (41%) and sexual abuse (20%), and more than 50% of these women do not tell anyone about the abuse. Of those women who do not seek help, 86% in one study stated that they thought abuse was “normal” or “not serious.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Sophie Budvietas, “Enough Is Enough,” *Samoa Observer*, 18 December, 2013.

In Samoa, social attitudes tolerate the abuse of women in the home and such abuse is common.<sup>2</sup>

A 2007 report on domestic violence in Samoa underscores the following findings:

... domestic violence victims were reluctant to report cases to the councils and instances were also reported where cases had not received a fair hearing due to the fact that 'some of these *matai* [chiefs] sitting there do this (domestic violence)' and 'they aren't going to judge another *matai*.' Taking complaints to the police was not encouraged and some villages banned this. The fact that there are two status groups for women in Samoa—the sisters and the wives—also influenced domestic violence. Wives had no rights in their husband's village and were expected to serve their husband's family, just as he did. They were and are a highly vulnerable group.<sup>3</sup>

A report from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community has confirmed the following facts about intimate partner violence against women in Samoa:

46% of Samoan women who have ever been in a relationship have experienced one or more kinds of partner abuse. The most common form of spousal abuse is physical abuse (38%), followed by sexual abuse (20%) and emotional abuse (19%). The kinds of abuse experienced by women include: being slapped or having objects thrown (35%); being punched (18%); being forced to have sex (17%); insults (14%); being coerced into having sex (11%); and being kicked, dragged or beaten (11%).<sup>4</sup>

There is general agreement among those who have studied violence against women in Pacific Islands' societies that it is premised on a natural law argument, which confines women to inferior roles. Akuila Yabaki makes this case in his claim that "Traditional gender roles in Pacific societies have been premised on women's biological capacity to bear children, and a division of labour

2 Mataafa Keni Lesa, "Domestic Violence, a Coward and Speaking Up," *Samoa Observer*, 18 February, 2014.

3 Peseta Betty Sio, "O Le Tofa Mamao: A Samoan Conceptual Framework for Addressing Family Violence," paper presented, Auckland Regional Network Meeting—Family and Sexual Violence, Western Springs, Auckland, NZ, 10 September, 2012, p. 7.

4 Refer to Secretariat for Pacific Community Report (2007), 14. Cited in Maiava Carmel Peteru, *Falevitu: A Literature Review on Culture and Family Violence in Seven Pacific Communities in New Zealand* (Auckland: Ministry of Social Development, 2012), p. 31.

believed to be dictated by nature and divine decree. Violence against women . . . is a serious consequence.”<sup>5</sup>

This conditioning is echoed by Samoan commentators on violence against women, such as the following observation by Mine Pase:

Samoa is a male-oriented culture, and women still hold a sub-dominant place in society. In a traditional cultural event . . . it is not uncommon for a woman of esteemed calibre or high social standing to be serving from the back, unrecognised. In a political setting she may be the boss, but in her own village among chief’s wives, she is a mere servant. . . . In short, as children are in some cultures, so are women in our Samoan culture—they are to be seen but not heard.<sup>6</sup>

This cultural ethos means that gender relations in Samoa, as in other Polynesian contexts, are “characterised by inequalities of power, opportunity and access to resources, (and) these relations are closely linked to cycles of violence that maintain low levels of status and high levels of victimization of women and girls.”<sup>7</sup> Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson’s work on violence against women in Pacific societies highlights the findings of research on the causes and manifestations of such violence in the Samoan context. They note that:

In the one study previously undertaken on violence against women in Samoa it was found that factors contributing to domestic abuse ranged from men’s use of alcohol and drugs to economic problems, lack of communication, and gender role expectations. Such abuse was found to be acceptable in situations where the victims failed to perform domestic duties, were disobedient, or refused to have sex with husbands or partners.<sup>8</sup>

5 Akula Yabaki, paper presented, Pacific Regional Workshop on Strengthening Partnerships for Eliminating Violence Against Women, Pacific Forum Secretariat, Suva, Fiji, 17–19 February, 2003.

6 Mine Pase, “Gospel and Culture Samoan Style,” in *Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceania*, ed. Lydia Johnson and Joan Filemoni-Tofaeono (Suva, Fiji: Weavers/SPATS and Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2003), pp. 72–8, at p. 72.

7 “Overview of Efforts to Eliminate Violence Against Women in the Pacific,” in *Strengthening Pacific Partnerships for Eliminating Violence Against Women: A Pacific Regional Workshop Report* (Suva, Fiji: Commonwealth Secretariat, UNDP/UNIFEM/Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2003), p. 82.

8 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 61. They refer here to the study prepared by Faasili Afamasaga and Kuineselani Tago, “Family Health and Safety Study

Peseta Sio's research underlines the 'shame factor' in the way domestic violence is handled in Samoa: "The belief is still widely held that family differences, such as domestic violence, should be settled within the family. These are not a matter for public discussion given the 'shame' this could bring. Disputes which cannot be solved within the family are usually placed before the Village Council."<sup>9</sup> Incidents of domestic violence are often swept under the carpet to protect family unity and honour, at the expense of the victims. The social organisation of Samoan communities makes it difficult to hold men accountable for the violence perpetrated. As Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson note, "The common response by men (when challenges to violence against women are raised) . . . is that it is 'our culture' that determines the clear gender role divisions, and that since culture is sacred it cannot be questioned."<sup>10</sup>

### The Problem of Biblical Interpretation

The Bible has often been misused to justify Samoan men's presumed superiority over women. Samoan family relationships are strongly influenced by the patriarchal system which dominates the Old Testament. This is a result of missionary teachings, whereby the English missionaries in the nineteenth century placed strong emphasis on the Old Testament. The New Testament was read but was hardly used in preaching. The missionaries described God as a patriarch, and espoused the subordination of women which was typical of the Victorian England from which they hailed.<sup>11</sup>

This patriarchal form of Christianity continues to shape Samoans' interpretation of the Bible. A literal reading of biblical passages is still used to

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of Violence Against Women in Oceania," report prepared for the Samoan Ministry of Women, the South Pacific Commission, and the UN Development Program, presented at the Pacific Regional Workshop on Strengthening Partnerships for Eliminating Violence Against Women, Suva, Fiji, 17–19 February, 2003.

9 Sio, "O Le Tofa Mamao: A Samoan Coneptual Framework for Addressing Family Violence," p. ii.

10 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 51.

11 This has been noted by another Polynesian woman theologian, Lousiale Uasike, whose Tongan culture shares many affinities with Samoan culture. She describes how the Victorian missionary culture bolstered existing patriarchal island social structures, noting that "... the Christianity that was brought to Tonga arrived in patriarchal form, and this comfortably reinforced the existing Tongan patriarchy." Lousiale Uasike, "Women in Transforming Mission: The Wesleyan Authority of Experience and Women Doing Theology in Tonga," D.Min. dissertation, San Francisco Theological Seminary, 2014, p. 128.

justify men's dominance over women and their physical 'discipline' of women and children. The Bible is not only taken out of context but is used to buttress the imbalance of power between men and women. In Samoan churches, "... traditional patriarchal interpretations of the Bible have been and remain unquestioned. The uncritical imposition of this approach to biblical hermeneutics ... is a contributing factor to the problem of violence against women ... It is through the influence of this tradition that the inferior status of women has been reinforced."<sup>12</sup>

### Power Imbalance

In 1999 the journal of the Council for World Mission, *Inside Out*, reported the following interview from the daily *Samoa Observer* newspaper:

Reporter: Do you think domestic violence is a problem in Samoa?

Man: No, it is not really a problem. But why beat your wife? They are useful to do the chores. But if the wife is wrong, she should be beaten, and if she is wrong again, she should be kicked out of the house.

Woman: No, it is not a problem here; if there is love and obedience, then there is [a] good relationship [which will] work.<sup>13</sup>

The article concludes, "What this conversation highlights is the construction of the man as the 'head of the household' and the way in which such a conversation is predicated on the possibility of violence."<sup>14</sup>

In other words, domestic violence in Samoa reveals the social reality of the imbalance of power between men and women. As one Samoan social commentator puts it, "Violence is the ultimate imbalance, and reflects a wider problem—that where women may be highly valued under some traditional structures, under modern structures like government and parliament their

12 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 96. Some of the biblical passages most frequently used by Samoan churches to justify male dominance include the following: the second creation story in Genesis 2:4b–3:24 (where it is argued that 'out of man woman was taken' means that women are inferior to men and must submit to their control); and 1 Corinthians 11:2–6 (where the words 'the head of every man is Christ, the head of a women is her husband' have been interpreted literally, ignoring the contextual considerations in first-century Corinth).

13 Cited in David G. Hallman, *Spiritual Values for Earth Community*, 89 vols., Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC, 2000), p. 33.

14 Ibid.

roles are not yet recognised.”<sup>15</sup> Samoa clearly reflects this power imbalance, as evident in the dialogue cited above.

Given this imbalance, violence can be inflicted on women because of the Samoan myth that they are ‘the weaker sex’ (*itupa vaivai*) while men are ‘the stronger sex’ (*itupa malosi*). Within this mythic social construction Samoan women are socialised to be obedient and to act in certain passive ways to avoid being beaten. In response, women internalise their submissive roles and their subordination to male authority to avoid violence, although sometimes it is inevitable. Men simply see women as properties that they own, control, use, and discard if they so desire.

### Domestic Violence and the Church

Some sources indicate that village pastors in Samoa do at times attempt to protect female victims of domestic violence by offering them a safe house or by intervening in domestic disputes.<sup>16</sup> However, in Fairbairn-Dunlop and colleagues’ research on domestic violence in Samoa, they discovered that “Domestic violence was not a priority on the agenda of the mainstream churches. Comments were made that churches need to look to their own practices first. At the same time, churches were seen to be the agencies which should be playing a lead role in addressing domestic violence and abuse issues.”<sup>17</sup>

This resonates with findings from other studies. The following quote summarises their findings: “Most of the mainline churches in Pacific Islands countries have not taken a proactive role to question or analyse cultural stereotypes, denounce gender inequalities or violence against women.”<sup>18</sup> Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson argue that because Pacific churches are “thoroughly entrapped in patriarchy, it is no wonder that they teach women that they must respect and obey men at all times . . . This is such a central understanding

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- 15 Jason Brown, “Lack of Hard Facts Holding Women Back,” *Samoa Observer*, 8 March, 2014.
- 16 Penny Martin, “Implementing Women’s and Children’s Rights: The Case of Domestic Violence in Samoa,” *Alternative Law Journal*, 27:5 (October, 2002), 227—Attachment 12.
- 17 Sio, “O Le Tofa Mamao: A Samoan Conceptual Framework for Addressing Family Violence,” p. 37.
- 18 Refer to the following works: AusAID, *Annual Report 2007–2008* (Canberra: Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2008), p. 18; A. Laqeretabua, V. Naidu, and S. Bhagwan Rolls, *Pacific Perspectives on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Children and Youth* (Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2009), p. 97.

in (these) church traditions that it must be viewed as a significant contributing factor to the problem of violence against women.”<sup>19</sup>

The churches in Samoa are primarily concerned with maintaining traditional marriage, at the expense of the victims of domestic violence. Their marriage rites “... reinforce the understanding that the man is given the divine authority to rule over the woman, since the wife promises to obey the husband, but not vice-versa. Because he is given this divine sanction through the sacrament of marriage, it can never be challenged.”<sup>20</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that in most cases the church is the last resort for women needing help in situations of domestic violence, due to the lack of confidentiality and lack of sensitivity to the concerns of the victims. As a result, women either choose to endure violence and remain silent or approach a non-governmental organisation such as the Samoa Victim Support Group (svsg), which has been very effective in its programmes to raise Samoan society’s awareness about violence and to combat domestic violence and all forms of violence against women.

Finally, mention must be made of the problem of the collusion of some Samoan clergy in the problem of violence against women. One of the reasons for their silence on this issue is that some clergy are themselves guilty of inappropriate behaviour toward women, either their wives or women in their parishes. Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson bring this generally unspoken reality to light:

The venerated position of male clergy... undermines the ability of the church to address the problem of clergy abuse... because it is a well-known fact—though one almost never acknowledged—that there are ordained clergy who are themselves perpetrators of abuse against women. ... These incidents are generally covered up by church authorities.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the church is not only silent about domestic violence but also takes part in it. All too often it either protects perpetrators or downplays and turns a blind eye to the domestic violence occurring in its midst.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 106.

20 Ibid.

21 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 120.

22 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson discuss this reality in the context of various types of abuse occurring on the campus of an island theological school, all of which were minimised or ignored by those in authority. See *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, Chapter 6,

Considering the increasing incidences of domestic violence, Samoan society is being called to acknowledge the reality before us and admit that domestic violence has become a normative aspect of everyday life in Samoa.

### A Public Theology Response to Domestic Violence

A public theology response to domestic violence in Samoa presents us with an enormous challenge “to rediscover our values—as people, as families, as communities of faith, and as a nation.”<sup>23</sup> Domestic violence in Samoa is an issue that reflects a “profound values crisis”<sup>24</sup> for Samoans. It is a problem that requires a search for the common good and a re-affirmation of the value and dignity of all life and all human beings.

The vision of a Samoan public theology is centred in the rediscovery and reappropriation of the core Samoan-Christian values of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *alofa* (love), *tautua* (selfless service), *amiotonu* (justice), and *soalaupule* (consensual dialogue). A critical reappropriation of these values can serve to restore justice and peace within family relationships torn apart by the impact of domestic violence. Core values in the *fa'asamoa* cannot be separated from Christian values. This is encapsulated in Moreli Niuatoa's comment that “*Fa'a-Samoa* (cultural values) and spirituality (religious values) are inseparable. Samoan spirituality is non-existent without *Fa'a-Samoa*.”<sup>25</sup>

In applying the core Samoan-Christian values of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *alofa* (love), *tautua* (selfless service), *amiotonu* (justice), and *soalaupule* (consensual dialogue), Samoan theologians and citizens can develop ways to initiate discussions on and respond to sensitive public issues such as domestic violence. In these public dialogues the core values will always be interrelated, such that each value supports, validates and strengthens the others.

#### Alofa (Love)

*Alofa* in Samoan culture is much deeper than compassion or natural affection. It entails a holistic view of the self in terms of behaviours and actions that

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“The Praxis of Violence Against Women in the Oceanian Theological School Setting,” pp. 124–138.

23 Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values in the City, Our Towns and in Your Community: A Moral Compass for the New Economy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), p. 1.

24 Ibid.

25 Peteru, *Falevitu: A Literature Review on Culture and Family Violence in Seven Pacific Communities in New Zealand*, i.

promote right relationships. Pa'u Mulitalo-Lauta refers to the Samoan saying, *e le na'o upu ma tala, a'o mea fa'atino e iloa ai le alofa*—"it is not just words, but action and commitment which truly demonstrate love, compassion and concern for others."<sup>26</sup> This explanation resonates with the New Testament Greek term *agape*—unconditional and sacrificial love as manifested in the love of God and Jesus.

*Alofa* has much to offer to public discussions on domestic violence. A non-governmental organisation that deals with domestic violence in Samoa highlights the principle of *alofa* as being at the very core of its work. In order to combat domestic violence, *alofa* needs to be restored within the primary agent of socialisation, the *aiga* (family). To the extent that this happens, generations to come will intentionally create a non-violent environment within the family. This is where the cycle of violence in families can be broken through reconnecting with the value of *alofa* that protects the *va* (right relationships) in God's creation.

The Apostle Paul, in his advice to the church in Corinth, said "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (NRSV, 1 Cor. 13:4–7) This is the foundation upon which *alofa/agape* is built.

### Fa'aaloalo (*Respect*)

*Alofa* is associated with *fa'aaloalo*. In the Samoan-Christian value system, showing love toward someone is the same as showing respect. This is clearly articulated in Tavita Maliko's statement that "The action [of respect] denotes love and in effect defines the person."<sup>27</sup>

Like *alofa*, *fa'aaloalo* is a holistic principle and protocol that involves the observance of *va* relationships [respecting space] between people, with the environment, and with God. Mulitalo-Lauta contends that "*Fa'aaloalo* is accorded naturally to another Samoan because of that person's ethnicity, gender, *matai* status and background. It is regarded by Samoans as part of the elaborate etiquette which forms the basis of their culture."<sup>28</sup> Yet despite the hierarchies implicit in Samoan culture, *fa'aaloalo* can also create equality in

26 Pa'u Mulitalo-Lauta, *Fa'asamoa and Social Work within the New Zealand Context* (Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press Ltd, 2000), p. 22.

27 Tavita Maliko, "O Le Soga'imiti: The Embodiment of God in the Samoan Male Body," Ph.D. thesis, University of Auckland, 2012, p. 217.

28 Mulitalo-Lauta, *Fa'asamoa and Social Work within the New Zealand Context*, p. 21.

relationships if used in its positive meaning, which is '*alo mai alo atu*' or 'reciprocal respect.'

*Fa'aaloalo* is biblical in its very nature, as it requires one to treat the other as one would like to be treated. In relation to domestic violence, *fa'aaloalo* should be manifested in one's respect for the sacredness of the space between persons, just as that respect also characterises one's relationship with God. This respect must be encouraged in conversations and behaviours in the family, village, church, civil society and other public places in Samoan society. *Fa'aaloalo* can never be used to justify domestic violence.

### **Tautua (*Selfless Service*)**

*Tautua* is already demonstrated in the work of organisations working to combat domestic violence in Samoa. But the church's role is also important, since part of the church's ministry is to embody service by providing spiritual guidance and counselling for both victims and perpetrators of violence. However, as evident in my research, this has not happened thus far. The value of *tautua* needs to be manifested in the church's pastoral care for those affected by domestic violence.

At the same time, theological reflection is needed to correct misinterpretations of selfless service which have been detrimental to Christian women. In this twisted version of Christian service, abused women "... have been exhorted to accept their suffering in imitation of the suffering of Christ... and counselled to 'carry the cross they have to bear.'<sup>29</sup> This is a theological distortion of *tautua* which has resulted in abused women being counselled by the church to stay in abusive relationships as a form of *tautua* to their husbands.

While *tautua* functions well in terms of the service provided by untitled men to their *matai*, and by members of various groups within the *nu'u* (village) based on their obligations within their respective groupings, it has been misunderstood within the institution of marriage. Here it seems to have been interpreted as sacrificial service by the wife to the husband, but not by the husband to the wife. *Tautua* must be re-envisioned as a mutual attitude of service between husbands and wives, men and women.

### **Soalaupule (*Consensual Dialogue*)**

We need to accept the reality that in all relationships there will be differences. There are no perfect relationships, but the foundation of maintaining healthy Christian relationships is dialogue. This is the contribution of *soalaupule* to a public theology response to domestic violence. The Samoan practice of

29 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 89.

*soalaupule* is inclusive in its positive intent, which is to foster the sharing of ideas. While acknowledging the influence of hierarchy, rank and status in the promotion of effective dialogue in Samoan culture, honest questions need to be raised about how this cultural norm should play out in marriage relationships. Supporting the significance of *soalaupule*, Elise Huffer and Lau Asofou So'o make the following claim:

The more people involved in the decision [or deliberation] the better, as dictated in the Samoan proverb: '*O le tele o sulu e maua ai figota e tele*' (*The more lit fire we have, the more fish we are likely to catch*). In some contexts, *soa* means advice. This meaning is also relevant, particularly in situations where people share ideas in trying to come up with a decision that satisfies everyone. In this context, *soalaupule* refers to people contributing to a decision in the form of a suggestion or advice.<sup>30</sup>

Huffer and So'o note that "*Soalaupule* also implies *alofa*. The fact that one has been asked to be part of the decision-making process means that someone cares about one's participation and the interests that one might have in the issues that will be discussed."<sup>31</sup> Jesus in his own public ministry utilised this value to enhance the spirituality of his disciples and those who were oppressed in his own society. Jesus dialogued with people like Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the young lawyer to liberate them from their own narrow-mindedness.

### Amiotonu (*Justice*)

According to Tui Atua, "Truth, love, justice remain, but other things change."<sup>32</sup> Just as *alofa* and *amiotonu* are critical in the *fa'asamoa*, they are also necessary in addressing domestic violence. The literature has highlighted a number of contributors to domestic violence, such as drunkenness, unemployment, jealousy, etc.—all of which take place within the larger umbrella of the unequal power relations endemic to patriarchy—but no matter which causes predominate in any given situation, domestic violence is related to a lack of justice. Justice, like love, respect, service and dialogue, must be seen in the light of God's attributes. If human relationships are rooted in these values, men and

30 E. Huffer and A. So'o, "Consensus Versus Dissent: Democracy, Pluralism and Governance in Sāmoa," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 44, no. 3 (2003): 281–304, at p. 283.

31 Ibid.

32 Cited in Alex Perrottet, "Samoa's Tupua Calls for 'Incorporation' of Maori Culture in NZ Law," *Pacific Media Centre* (2011): 1–3, at 1.

women will relate to one another using the language of love and justice, which are at the very heart of the Gospel. Christopher Marshall writes,

Through the cross of Christ, God has worked justice for those oppressed by the tyranny of law, sin, and death, those unable to free themselves from such cruel oppressors. Paul states both sides of this justice equation in Romans 3:26, where the gospel demonstrates that “[God] himself is righteous [just] and that he justifies [or secures justice for] the one who has faith in Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

### *Fa’asamoa (Samoan Way) and the Christian Faith*

Samoa has unique cultural characteristics which differ from those in many other places. Because Samoa’s culture came to be grounded in the Christian faith, Christianity occupies a prominent position in Samoan public life. All spheres of Samoan life appeal to Christian values. The constitution of Samoa upholds the crucial role of the Christian faith in shaping the lives of Samoan people. Public occasions and celebrations typically begin with a formal devotion conducted by a village pastor. Villages in Samoa observe evening curfews where all families are expected to conduct prayers and devotions. These quiet times are well policed by village chiefs and untitled men, as a sign of respect to God and to maintain peace and stability. This is one of many traditions which reinforce the embodied Christian value system of Samoan society.

This interconnectedness between culture and Christianity means that there is theoretically a natural opening for Christian values, which reinforce Samoan core values, to be taken seriously in addressing issues of public concern such as domestic violence. The challenge occurs when these core values are overtaken by powerful countervailing worldviews such as patriarchy—the foundational sub-structure that supports and maintains domestic violence.

### **The Role of the Church**

The conservative nature of the mainline churches in Samoan society has resulted in the church becoming an institution that supports the status quo. One clear evidence of the church’s failure to become prophetic is its silence on the issue of domestic violence. This silence means turning a blind eye to the suffering of some of the most vulnerable members of society.

33 Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), p. 41.

If the church is to become prophetic and participate in public theology around domestic violence and other social problems it must, in the first instance, be open to becoming better informed by sources of expertise on specific social issues. This includes proactively seeking out contributions from secular fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and other relevant disciplines. Their contributions can then be analysed and strengthened in the light of insights from Scripture and theology. Armed with this broad-based knowledge, the church can then wholeheartedly embrace its prophetic role, which is crucial in promoting the common good of its people. The church must speak and act in relation to all matters affecting the lives of its people, instead of merely parroting what government leaders expect the church to say.

### The Church as the Agent of Public Theology

In the process of naming the church's failure to address domestic violence, opportunities arise to discuss what it would be like if the church did its homework on a theological response to domestic violence. Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson challenge all Pacific churches to break their silence and passivity on this issue, decrying the fact that the churches "have been neither prophetic nor pastoral in terms of social issues such as violence against women."<sup>34</sup> The Samoan Ombudsman, Maiava Iulai Toma, has also challenged the church in a sermon, proclaiming "Surely the time has come for local congregations and for national churches to cross the road and to give of their time and resources to aid victims of violence within our churches and community."<sup>35</sup> Toma further calls for the church to "... be a safe place for women to come and tell their story and to seek comfort. They should not be told to go home to pray more, to submit more, and to turn the other cheek."<sup>36</sup>

If the church were to engage in serious theological reflection about domestic violence, taking on board insights from other relevant disciplines, it would be able to formulate concrete guidelines for change. These guidelines would evolve from public theologians' engagement with core Samoan-Christian values around the issue of domestic violence. Such engagement would explore specific ways in which Samoans might draw upon the values of *fā'aaloalo* (respect), *alofa* (love), *tautua* (selfless service), *amiotonu* (justice),

34 Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat*, p. 122.

35 Maiava Iulai Toma, "Churches Need to Bear Witness to Domestic Violence," *Samoa Observer*, 12 December, 2013.

36 *Ibid.*

and *soalaupule* (consensual dialogue) to further the goal of bringing an end to domestic violence. This would entail asking hard questions about what it would mean if these values were taken seriously in responses to domestic violence by the church, civil society, and government—indeed, by all participants in the public sphere.

### Conclusion

This article has brought theological and cultural reflection to bear on the issue of domestic violence in Samoa. Public theology must begin by framing any given social issue in terms of a comprehensive understanding of causes, manifestations and contextual ramifications. Contextualisation is always important in the doing of public theology, and this article has brought the issue of domestic violence into focus in its Samoan setting. The presupposition is that theological discourse in the Samoan public square, if it is to have relevance for the society as a whole, must reflect the core values that are central to the Samoan identity—values which are intrinsic both to the Samoan culture and to the Christian faith. This way of doing public theology in the Samoan context has important ramifications for addressing social problems such as domestic violence.

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