Physician, heal thyself:
Planning and “making right” (pono) for the next generation

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi
Keynote Address
The Big Island Liturgy and Arts Centre Conference
Hilo, Hawaii
2 November 2007

Introduction

In reflecting on the theme I have been given: “What is “pono” – right or good – in our Pacific Island cultures today”, I keep coming back to three questions. These three questions were asked of me during the question and answer session of a public lecture I gave this time last year in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, titled: O le faautaga i le faaluafesasi: Insight into dilemmas: Advancing Pasifika peoples in Aotearoa.1

At this public lecture I spoke about Karl Barth’s notion of ‘God-sickness’ and Francis Thompson’s idea of ‘God-chasing’. I spoke about their ideas in relation to education and the virtues and constraints of that education.

The three questions were: First: “Is God-sickness analogous to a loss of cultural identity”? If yes, second: How do we move from God-sickness to God-chasing”? And, then third: “How might we teach our children, raised outside their Pacific island homelands, in New Zealand [or the United States], respect for their elders when they have lost their culture”? These questions face all Pacific island cultures and peoples today who want to retain what is good and right, what is pono, within their cultures across generations and geographies.

Each of these questions essentially asks the same thing. They are asking how we as a community, as Pacific or Samoan or Hawaiian peoples, as women or men, girls or boys, gain hope for living a healthy life. Here I read healthy as synonymous with harmonious, and harmonious as synonymous with “right or good” – what Samoans call “ono/onomea”; Maori call “tika”; and I believe, Hawaiians refer to as “pono”.

These three interrelated questions, as I read them, are asking about how we might enable healing, not only of the body, but of the mind and the soul. It is from this conceptual place that I approach my topic today.

In my attempts to search for deeper meaning, nuance and metaphor in my life I am increasingly finding myself today involved in discussions that range from theology to social policy; from health to education. In all of these discussions, I am not searching for a truth, or the truth, but for an accommodation of many truths, including mine.

For me this search has entailed finding a place for my indigenous reference where I am no longer afraid to assert in public or private its poignancy and relevance. Nor do I doubt anymore its rightful place among the knowledges of the world.
To begin I want to say a little about what I mean by ‘God-sickness’ and ‘God-chasing’. ‘God-sickness’ and ‘God-chasing’ are indicative of the tensions between wanting to know God and searching for God. God in this sense is the Almighty; the knower of all truth; the alpha and omega. To say that one knows God is to assert arrogance – what one might call “God-sickness”. To say that one chases God is to say that they are in constant search of him. Let me explain a little more.

**God-sickness and God-chasing**

John C. McDowell sums up Karl Barth’s insight on ‘God-sickness’ in his suggestion that God-sickness is about the dimensions of complacency created by theology, religion, Church and culture that prevent one from really knowing (through thinking and feeling) of God. He states:

What is most prominent in [Barth’s] infamous work of 1921, on Paul’s letter to the Romans, is the rupturing of all forms of human culture and theological discourse and practice. A *krisis* [barrier] is pronounced on all human attempts to pass through to speaking of and conceptualising God, the Wholly Other (*totaliter aliter*) infinitely and qualitatively divided from creatures. In this context, Barth stringently critiques theology, religion, church (as the particular cradle of religion), and culture, claiming that religion is the most dangerous enemy that humanity can have, apart from God, since it all too easily lulls one into a false sense of security and into the complacent belief that one has done all that needs to be done to gain the divine favour. In its "criminal arrogance" it [theology, religion, church and/or culture] produces, thereafter, "comfortable illusions about the knowledge of God and union with him". This is, however, a sign of both religion’s and the church’s "veritable God-sickness [Gotteskrankheit]" and its Tower of Babel. ²

For me, Barth says that there is difficulty in conceptualising ‘God the Absolute’ and that that difficulty derives from man’s arrogance, criminal arrogance no less, in his pursuit of finding union with God. ‘God-sickness’ is, thus, about man’s unhealthy preoccupation with one truth, one way of knowing, thinking, feeling, being.

God-chasing, on the other hand, is about searching for truth, for knowledge, of God. Francis Thompson in his poem, ‘Hound of Heaven’ alludes to the notion of ‘God-chasing’. Here he speaks to the context of God trying to make known his purpose for us. In this we recognise that there is a God and that he has a purpose for us. The difference between ‘God-sickness’ and ‘God-chasing’ is that one is about barriers to knowing God and the other is about seeking and finding what God’s purpose is for you. I find Thompson’s point about ‘God-chasing’ most present in his first stanza. I quote:

```
I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter;
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
```
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat — and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me. 3

The dilemma between ‘God-sickness’ and ‘God-chasing’ lies in the spaces between knowing, doing and feeling; between the spiritual and intellectual; the sacred and profane; temporal and divine; indigenous and introduced.

To adapt cultural values and practices in a way that can enable healing and wellbeing in our communities, one must acknowledge that there exists both God-sickness and God-chasing within. These notions of God-sickness and God-chasing are implicit in the phrase that forms the title of my talk – Physician, heal thyself! In Samoan, Le taulasea e, ia mua’i foia lou ma’i.

Physician, heal thyself!

The saying ‘Physician, heal thyself” comes from Luke 4: 23. In this text Luke says,

Physician, heal thyself, whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.

In searching for various interpretations of this biblical text I came across an author who suggests that the text meant “that people should take care of their own defects and not just correct the faults of others”4. But this author then quite rightly asks: “But do any of my visitors [patients or students] think that physicians [teachers, leaders] have the strength of professionalism and ethics to do that on their own”? That is, to take care of their own defects and not just correct those of others?

To me this biblical text is saying that in order for me to establish my credentials and credibility as a physician, healer or leader, I must first heal myself, practice healing with my own, before I extend my skills outside my community.

To ask whether God-sickness is analogous to a loss of cultural identity is to misunderstand the point about God-sickness. God-sickness implies that the physician has a ‘health impediment’ – that he or she is so preoccupied with him or herself, their knowledge frames and truths, that they see no other knowledge frames or truths. These physicians have not lost their cultural identity; they believe they have the cultural identity. God-sickness is thus not analogous to a loss of cultural identity because for there to be a loss there must first be a gain. One cannot lose something one never had in the first place.

Cultural identity assumes a coherent, stable and positive frame of reference for being, knowing, acting, engaging, eating, sleeping and so forth. It assumes that what is culture is understood, practiced and embraced by many. It assumes that what becomes and remains culture is something that gives meaning to people and their lives. Anthropologists argue that culture is that “body of shared understandings in terms of which social interactions take place”5 (Hooper, 1993). For me culture is a
frame of knowing and doing referenced on mythology, history and living customs. To lose one’s cultural identity is to lose access to this frame of knowing, doing, speaking, seeing and feeling. Many of our young people today have not lost their culture, they lack it. That is, they have not been given it, or shown it, or been told that this is your culture and this is why we should hold on to it.

Knowing one’s culture is like knowing truth, it is contingent, always changing, adapting. Cultural adaptation is inevitable. In earlier times it occurred slowly and change was absorbed with little fuss into the process of daily living. Today change and cultural adaptation is swift and often occurs outside one’s control. Cultural adaptation in and of itself is good for no culture remains fixed for all time. But cultural learning, like any learning, must have a solid foundation. For as G. K. Chesterton says: “The object of opening the mind, like opening the mouth is to shut it on something solid”.

Healing another is more than just treating the physical wound. It is also about treating the symptoms and understanding the healing exchange necessary between patient and physician. It is a healing exchange that is more than just physical, it is also spiritual.

To “make right or good”, therefore, is to heal and bring balance to the spirit, the mind, the body and the soul.

**Healing the mind, body and soul**

Enabling better understanding of our indigenous references to healing and “making right or good” that which has been broken, we must navigate the harmonies between man and self, man and the environment, man and his fellow men, and man and the cosmos. I want to raise only the harmony between man and self to make my point about the insights our indigenous reference can offer on issues of healing the mind, body and soul.

**Harmony between Man and Self**

I draw from an earlier paper I gave for a Colloquium on Interreligious Dialogue on the Contribution of Indigenous Religions to Peace, presented in Rome, 2005. In this paper I stated that harmony between man and self acknowledges that humans are self-reflective beings. Human intelligence and wisdom transpires as much through self-reflection and personal experience as by objective analyses or peer and elder mentoring. Self-reflection through *anapogi* (meaning fasting and meditation) and *moe manatunatu* (meaning dream dialogue with ancestors and/or family gods) are methods or tools promoted by the indigenous Samoan religion for gaining perspective on the harmony between man and his inner self.

In the Samoan indigenous religion there are three key parts to a person or self: the *tino* or body, the *mafaufau* or mind and the *agaga* or soul. Harmony with the self requires harmony in the body, the mind and most importantly the soul.

The body and all its movements and/or performances reflect at all times God’s divinity, from the most physical and ceremonial to the most mundane. Hence, the
For Samoans harmony in the body was crucial because it determined how well people could engage in core survival tasks such as planting, hunting, fishing, cooking, sex, play, martial arts and so on. A harmonious body was therefore one that exhibited physical dexterity and symmetry and enabled sexual and reproductive prowess. Beauty and harmony in the body was reflected in the physical and spiritual symmetry achieved through the performance of the twin disciplines of physical exercise and dietary control. The Samoan saying, ‘e le soona ai Tamaalii’ (meaning, ‘a mark of a chief is reflected in his eating regime’) alludes to the importance of dietary discipline to achieving harmony in the body.

Harmony in the mind involves finding unity in the messages conveyed by the senses. The evidence perceived by the nose, the eyes, the mouth and the ears, each situated in the head, is communicated to the brain and made sense of by the mind. It is the function of the mind to assess sensory evidence for cognitive meaning. Lagi which is the term for the heavens, the highest point in the cosmos, is also the honorific term for the head. To touch the head of a chief is a serious breach of tapu, because the head as the residence of divine discernment should not be tampered with. The divinity of the head gives rise to the Samoan saying: ‘o le faiva o mafau ma le faatoomo ma le faasoasoa’ (meaning, the function and purpose of the mind is to discern evidence and make good judgements). So if the function of the mind is senses-oriented, the function of the soul relates to matters beyond or outside the senses.

The soul, which in Samoan is the agaga or mauli, resides between the heart (or fatu) and the lungs (or māmā). The significance of this is that the heart represents God as the prime mover, who provides rhythm and life to the mind and body, whilst the lungs are the custodians of the breath of life. When Samoans want to establish death in the body it is the heart that they first consult. When a chief blesses his successor he breathes his blessing (i.e. feula le faamanuaga) into his successor’s open mouth. Moreover, when two people greet in embrace, cheek to cheek, they will breathe in through their noses the mana of the other. Samoans call this sogi. The spiritual contents of the chief’s blessing and the breathed-in mana of the sogi, travel first to the lungs, the custodians of the breath of life, then to other parts of the body and mind.

The function of the heart is to make and provide blood for the body. The function of the lungs is to provide oxygen to facilitate the work of the heart. Together they give life to the body and mind. So the question arises how do you give life to the soul? I address this question by briefly examining the processes of anapogi and moe manatunatu.

Anapogi literally refers to the rituals of the evening. It is a ritual of self denial, prayer and meditation, i.e. the denial of food, company, sex and other distraction. The ritual
often entailed isolation of self from the village, often in the still of the forest and evening, where the person can contemplate the harmonies and gain spiritual insight.

*Moe manatunatu*, on the other hand, is a dream dialogue with ancestors and family gods, available to man depending on the spiritual levels attained in his processes of *anapogi*. *Tofa* and *moe* are both Samoan terms associated with the *moe manatunatu*. Both mean sleep: i.e. *tofa* is the sleep of the chief and *moe* the sleep of the orator. Moreover, *tofa* and *moe* also refer respectively to the views of chiefs and orators; such views can be informed by their *moe manatunatu*. Through *moe manatunatu* the gods and ancestors are able to assist the chief and orator not only in decisions concerning the self but also in decisions relating to family and community.

Through both *moe manatunatu* and *anapogi*, the soul is fed. Both invite self-reflection and re-assessment, not only of the contexts of today, but of yesterday and tomorrow. Spiritual insight assists in the achievement of mental and physical harmony. Through the harmonies of body, mind and soul, the self searches and achieves levels of spiritual harmony and personal peace.

In the Samoan indigenous religion there are ten levels of spirituality or heavens that man aspires to. In the ninth heaven lives Amoā, the daughter of Tagaloa, who personifies the *feagaiga* (the status of a sacred covenant). In the tenth heaven resides Tagaloa. Man, in his quest for spiritual development, can only attain the first nine heavens. To want to reach the tenth heaven is presumptuous. It is presumptuous because the tenth heaven is the Absolute and in it resides Tagaloa, the Absolute.

To be presumptuous is to lack humility. In Samoan the term for humility is *loto maualalo*, meaning to have mental and emotional acceptance of a lower status. The lower status implied here is that lower to the status of the ultimate and Absolute, lower to that of Tagaloa.

In the search for peace and for what is good and right, the harmonies between man and the cosmos, man and the environment, man and man and man and the self are, each and together, about man’s continual search for the ultimate harmony. It is this search rather than the finding of these harmonies that gives emphasis, purpose and meaning to the self and to life. It is this search that gives spiritual context to the healing exchange necessary between physician and patient; parent and child; offender and offended; teacher and pupil; leader and follower.

The question poses itself: How do we organise the process of healing or of making right within ourselves, our families, communities and nations that which have been wronged? How do we identify and locate what is amiss, or what needs remedying or healing? How do we soul search for the individual, the family, the community and the nation in times of flux? One way is to know how to pose the right questions and generate an openness to debating these questions from different vantage points and to learn and share from any discussion that may ensue.
To share and learn about anything, least of all an indigenous reference that some argue have no place in modern life, is to invoke a process that recognises the different tools for learning and sharing available. Language and culture are part of those tools.

In my time my learning and modes for sharing were taught to me and facilitated by my *matua tausi* (literally, an elder who is looked after) and through the art of *faafaletui* (meaning, a meeting for the purpose of consultation or education).

**Healing through matua tausi and by faafaletui**

*Matua tausi* are core to the Samoan indigenous reference because they are the heart and soul of nurturing. They give love and stability and provide the basis for consensus in the Samoan family context. They bring in wisdom and serve as the arbitrators in moments of family upheaval.

*Matua tausi* are in many ways the last ‘court of appeal’ in the Samoan village sense. They provide the last resort for peace. Where there is a rupture in the village set up and it seems that differences are irreconcilable and village harmony is to be upset, for example when a village is determining allegiances in war, then a special *fono tauati* is called. This type of *fono* or meeting involves even the *aumaga* (the untitled men’s guild) and the *auluma* (the unmarried and untitled women’s guild). If this fails then the last resort, the last ‘court of appeal’, is the *matua tausi*.

The healing or “making right or good” process offered by the *matua tausi* derives from the pull they have over the members of their family, especially those who were raised and nurtured by them.

The question posed in Samoan at the AUT public lecture by a Samoan mother about how we might teach our children, who are raised in New Zealand, respect for their elders, is on my reflection about a pining for the legacy of the *matua tausi*. It is a pining for the bonding that occurs between *matua tausi* and their children, biological or adopted. It is a pining for the affection and love between an elder and the young, obvious in their every movement, gesture, look and word, so much so that the children right through to their later years carry with them an innate sense of respect for elders. This is a bond so strong that any disrespect incurred between the young and their elders are tantamount to breaching *tapu*. It is a bond that will never leave them no matter how successful or downtrodden they become.

The place of *matua tausi* in the hearts and souls of Samoans may be found in the everyday experience of ensuring that they received the best food the family could offer. I remember vividly witnessing a son and a nephew, in their eighties, walking all the way from the villages of Neiafu and Vaisala to Asau in Savaii to deliver, more often the best of their meals, to a matriarch of my family, who lived till 111 years. This was their *taulaga* (gift) to her. When you witnessed the glow in the old girl’s face and the glow in their faces, despite the long walk, you can not help but be touched by it. The healing that *matua tausi* offers when their children, immediate and extended, fight is founded on this love, commitment and sharing. What this suggests is that mediation of conflict, i.e. making something right or good, emerges not only by knowing conflict resolution strategies, but more fundamentally by knowing what touches the heart and the soul.
The Samoan mother is right in her lament of a loss of ‘culture’ among our young. But that loss is not the fault of the young; nor really is it the fault of the parent or the elder. It is a consequence of a whole combination of factors, factors which brings poverty – poverty of the mind, the body and the soul. The role of the *matua tausi*, together with parents and elders, is to nurture our minds, bodies and souls.

This nurturing also exists in non-formal learning settings. From the mentoring kind exemplified by Plato, Aristotle and the early Greek philosophers who taught through a process of personal mentoring, to what in traditional Samoan times, has been described as the *faafaletui*.

The old school system of the *faafaletui* served us well in that what was transferred in the mentoring process was not only the knowledge or message of the mentor but also his or her *mana*. The exchange between mentor and mentee was not only cerebral, it was also spiritual. In the modern schooling system that our Pacific island cultures have adopted today, the place of the *faafaletui* of old is lost, or in the least, made irrelevant.

For those who continue to pine for the old *faafaletui* system of learning what this loss gives rise to, is the separation of the soul from the mind in such ways that one can easily become unduly preoccupied with one over the other. To heal thyself is to find balance and harmony in our preoccupations. One place to start in this healing process is by encouraging ‘healthy’ critique, not only of the cultural references of others, but perhaps more importantly, of our own.

Collective responsibility requires open critique and dialogue

It is a fallacy to believe that the picture is better in our Pacific island homelands. The loss or lack of cultural reference affects us in the homelands as much as it affects those living in metropolitan communities. Hawaii presents a unique case in that you seem to have a bit of both worlds – a metropolitan life in an island community. The competing cultural references of western liberalism and global consumerism, however, affect all of us alike.

What we need to be careful of is that we do not become so overwhelmed by the seeming enormity of western global culture that we stop talking to each other, especially to our young; that we stop sharing with them in true dialogue, the good and not so good of our cultures. This is an imperative if we are to achieve healthier lifestyles and a plan for “making it right” for the next generation – a plan that does justice to the good of the cultural legacies of our old.

God-chasing is about being able to hear and feel those voices that come into dialogue with us in our pursuit of what is right and good in our cultures. The churches, like the schools and the hospitals, have a role to play in this dialogue. The long term solution to a poverty of the mind, soul and body is a programme that can touch and feed not only the (rational) mind but the (feeling) heart. Our code of ethics or ethical standards must be more than mere administrative or bureaucratic checks on professional actions. They must also be checks on the physician’s, teacher’s, leader’s or elder’s vision for working, teaching and healing.
This emphasis on finding an openness to dialogue can spawn and develop self respect. You can not develop self-respect by saying ‘go home and plant bananas’ or by saying ‘you are a lost cause’ to our young. We have to take a hard look at ourselves as Pacific islanders, assess our problems and see how we can lift ourselves from the mire and how we can formulate a vision that we can diligently pursue, one that will guarantee or secure a position of equality between our people and others in our new homelands, in New Zealand, the United States, Australia or elsewhere. Self-respect is not only founded on respect for ourselves but also on a respect for others and on the respect that others have for us. To achieve that we have to work on a blend between our culture, our mores and ethos, with the culture, mores and ethos of the other communities that we engage. In my view we can only succeed in doing that by offering a positive and constructive contribution that originates from our indigenous reference.

The problem of poverty, whether of the mind, the body or soul, is a problem of deprivation. How then might we raise our people to believe themselves out of deprivation? You are not going to do that by any stretch of the imagination if you start with a hang-up over our or their cultural or indigenous reference.

We, both the indigenous and the others, must start by finding context and by sharing that context. We cannot find our self respect as Pacific island peoples if our indigenous reference is not part of the curriculum, part of our education system, or even of our theology. We cannot survive and flourish merely on the models of faafaletui or matua tausi of old. Nor can we survive and flourish only on models of formalised religion or education. We survive and flourish by employing both, equally. Both contribute to the kind of dialogue that can promote equality between peoples despite their dilemmas of God-sickness and God-chasing.

Conclusion

I want to end with a note about an old aunt of mine, Kalala, who enjoyed shouting her responses in a Catholic rosary. When the priest had to intervene and say: ‘Kalala, scale your voice down’, she would put her fan before her face and in a staged whisper would say to all next to her, ‘Pagā Patele, pe na te lē iloa e mamo i luga le Atua’ – ‘poor Patele, does he not know that God is so far above’. The notion that you have to frame your message through a decibel in your voice level is effectively countered by Dickens who states that:

> The forces that affect our lives, the influence that mould and shape us, are often like whispers in a distant room, teasingly indistinct, apprehended only with difficulty.\(^8\)

And, by Michael King who says that God expresses himself through the regenerative processes of nature when he points out that after years of abuse nature has the,

> …capacity to recover from past abuse, for …[i]n just over one hundred years it has reassembled its elements and reasserted its healing powers. Even a kiwi has returned, and we hear its shrill cry as it feeds in the bush around the house at night. It is in this healing process that I apprehend what I would now call God.\(^9\)
It is this discernment of message and the apprehension of meaning and the sharing of insights and perspectives that provides the healing of body, mind and soul; that provides what is good and right in life (pono, tika and ono/onomea) and in our planning for the next generation.

Soifua.

Notes


7 The titular head of the aumaga known as the manaia has status which is equivalent to matai status. The titular head of the aualuma is the taupou which, as the name suggests, gives entitlement to a post which also suggests the equivalent of matai status. The taupou, sa’otama’ita’i or feagaiga denotes recognition of the special status of women in village hierarchy.
