

BOOK REVIEW

God is Samoan: Dialogues between Culture and Theology in the Pacific. Matt Tomlinson. 2020, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu. Hardback, illustrated, 160 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8248-8097-2.

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Matt Tomlinson's new book with the rather striking title *God is Samoan* is an anthropological study of contextual theology and theologians in the central Pacific, namely Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, and the dialogue between Pacific Islander theologians and culture. Contextual theology refers to the adaptation of religious teachings to fit to a particular culture or worldview. Christianity has become deeply embedded in the culture of most Pacific Islands since the arrival of missionaries and continues to play a central role in everyday life, law, and national policies. To understand Pacific societies, it is important to discern how the Biblical teachings have been contextualized and practiced in diverse island cultures. This book provides insights into that process. Tomlinson, who is Associate Professor of Anthropology at The Australian National University, examines the ways in which Pacific theologians relate the Gospel and its symbols within their respective sociocultural contexts. His analysis was informed by theses, dissertations, and books by Pacific Islanders focusing on contextual theology as well as a large number of their articles in the *Pacific Journal of Theology*. He also collected information through ethnographic fieldwork at the four theological colleges; the Pacific Theological College (an ecumenical theological college located in Suva, Fiji), the Methodist Piula Theological College in Samoa, the Kanana Fou Theological Seminary in American Samoa, and the School of Theology at University of Auckland in New Zealand.

The book is organized into four distinct but somewhat overlapping themes of discussions. Chapter 1 explores the dialogue between theologians and the Bible with reference primarily to the Pacific. It looks how Pacific contextual theologians respond critically to the fundamentalists who understand the Bible texts as the sole authority for life and faith, and apply them to contemporary issues without question. The Samoan theologian Ama'amalele Tofaeono argues that 'there is an absence of awareness that what the Bible says can be problematic and can hardly orient us to face all present-day problems in our particular context' (32). The chapter also discusses the works by Pacific theologians who reevaluate missionary translations of the Bible. For example, Simolea Liusamoa questions the use of the Samoan term *taupou* (a virgin daughter of high chief) to depict the virginity of Mary because the term denotes an aristocratic woman which Mary was not. He suggests replacing the term *taupou* with the term *fafine* (female), which was used in the original Bible translation (35-16). Other theologians contend that verses that did not fit Pacific context might have been omitted from Scripture intentionally to avoid misunderstanding (43). That said, as the American theologian Bart D Ehrman says, the '...Bible has always been partial and incomplete' (47).

In today's Pacific societies, according to Tomlinson, 'because churches are so finely and firmly interwoven with family life, education, and local and national politics, they are inevitably caught up in all

kinds of social changes' (49). In Chapter 2, he closely looks at the ways in which Pacific theologians use culture to discuss social changes with three key topics: feminist theology, the Samoan concept of service, and prophetic speaking models. The chapter examines how Pacific theologians apply cultural concepts to critique and negotiate social issues including the status of churches and Christianity in today's Samoa.

Feminist theologians have challenged the patriarchal structure within church that excludes women from ordination as well as Bible teachings that justify the subordination of women and hence can be interpreted to validate violence against women (49-52). Other theologians define service as the core act of being a good Christian and acknowledge monetary contributions as a key form of service to church and pastors. Service then equates to an act of worshipping God (57). Some contextual theologians, on the other hand, claim to be prophetic when interpreting social issues and warning from God (60). The chapter concludes that the dialogue between contextual theology and the church remains challenging because the church elders who could respond most effectively to cultural arguments in theology are not likely to read academic theses and journal articles written by Pacific contextual theologians (63-64)

Chapter 3 turns to the dialogue between culture and theology and examines the ways in which Pacific theologians define Pacific identities in theology through culture. It looks at three cultural symbols: *talanoa* (storytelling), *mana* (supernatural power), and *kava* (a beverage extracted from the root of *Piper methysticum* consumed popularly throughout the Pacific) as well as the stories related to ancestral spirits. In this chapter, Tomlinson discusses the ways in which contextual theologians reinterpret Bible texts to encompass indigenous practices and beliefs, and apply their own theological orientation to address the Pacific cultural context. For instance, some Pacific theologians interpret the pounding of *kava* as a symbol of Christ who was also crushed on the cross and thus liquid *kava* resembles the blood of Jesus that was poured out to redeem us. They suggest using *kava* for communion instead of red wine or fruit juice that is not Pacific in origin. Such Pacific Theology, cited by Tomlinson, is also known as 'Coconut Theology', was first developed by the Tongan Methodist theologian Sione 'Amanaki Havea in the mid-1980s. It was based on the Pacific communal way of life rooted in the community cooperation, extended family networks, and care for elders (67). While culturally contextual Pacific theology is being developed, other theologians like Ma'afu Pula have criticized it vigorously, arguing that 'God is beyond culture. [Their concern is that] contextual theology threatens to cease being theology and turn into religious anthropology' (86).

The dialogue in Chapter 4 discusses Pacific contextual theologians who have articulated their ideas in the articles in Pacific Journal of Theology (PJT). It examines Pacific theology founded on sacredness of sea and land, the core aspects of the Pacific phenomenology and ontology. Pacific eco-theologian Leslie Boseto's article in PJT, for example, emphasizes the totality of humanity and the environment as God's creation, and declares that 'the more we love Christ, the more we love the earth and the more we love the earth the more we suffer with the whole creation as one body of Christ' (88).

For him, global capitalism is the system of deterioration that separates indigenous people from the Mother Ocean and earth. Other prominent Pacific theologians including Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere see land as a divine gift to humans and declare the holistic oneness that ultimately 'man and land are one' (94). The

chapter also touches upon how contextual theologians position the indigenous divinity in their teaching and theology.

In the concluding chapter, Tomlinson addresses the ways in which theologians and anthropologists view culture differently. For many anthropologists, culture and society found divinity, but for many theologians, divinity creates culture and society. Pacific contextual theologians often define culture as a stable source of analysis and an identifiable object of critique which theology can draw upon to address social issues. They see 'the culture concept as firm enough to explain anything or to resist dissolution in modern conditions' (103). Anthropologists, on the other hand, no longer see culture as solid framework of explanation. Therefore, theologians and anthropologists lack firm ground on which to dialogue. Tomlinson hopes that this book will help bridge that gap and provide insights into how Pacific theologians use cultural concepts and symbols to assert their 'Otherness'.

Overall, this extremely informative book provides an excellent template for a better understanding of contextual theologians in the Pacific as well as their diligent efforts to establish the Pacific Way in theology. The range of stories and voices contained in the book is valuable especially to scholars outside theological colleges who have few opportunities to learn about Pacific contextual theology. For such readers, more historical and political background related to the development of Pacific Theology would be helpful as the idea of a 'Pacific Way' is associated with decolonization. Pacific Theology did not emerge only as a new kind of contextual theology, but rather as an outcry of Pacific peoples whose culture had been denied and belittled by colonizers. Pacific Theology challenges fundamentalists who refuse to recognize the history of Samoa, Tonga, or Fiji before the arrival of Christianity. It is a symbol that true independence has finally been achieved.

As Tomlinson clearly states, the focus of this study has been on mainstream denominations of protestant churches with deep historical roots in Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. Therefore, the study does not address other long established denominations including Catholic Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Seventh-day Adventist Church or even newer evangelical churches including the Worship Centre and the Assemblies of God. Interestingly, census data suggests that in Samoa, adherence to the mainstream protestant churches that this study focuses is failing. For example, according to Samoa's Population Census 2016, Christian church affiliation with Congregational Christian Church of Samoa has continuously declined from 47.5% in 1981, to 35% in 2001, and then 29% in 2016. On the other hand, the Worship Centre, one of Samoa's fastest growing churches, now occupies 2.8% of religious affiliation of Samoa. It would be interesting to know the ways in which pastors and ministers of these fast growing churches place culture in their Biblical teachings and how their similar or different styles of contextual theology have influenced the shift in religious affiliation. That said, the book *God is Samoa* has opened a rich field of future anthropological research on the production of theological knowledge and pedagogy of Word of God in the Pacific.