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## Samoa and the Christian state ideal

Rex Tauati Ahdar

This article explores the notion of a Christian state in the context of the South Pacific island nation of Samoa. Samoa is not a Christian state in the constitutional *de jure* sense. There is no formal entrenchment of establishment of Christianity as the official religion. But it is a *de facto* Christian state in that the substance of its laws reflects Christian beliefs. The article also considers whether it is a Christian *nation*. In many cultural and sociological senses it is. In terms of Christian practice however, an affirmative verdict is highly doubtful. Finally, the article suggests that asking the Christian nation question might be misplaced, for no nation can be a ‘chosen’, covenantal nation, à la Israel, in the New Testament era.

**Keywords:** Church establishment; Christian state, Christian nation; ‘chosen’ people; theocracy; Independent State of Samoa; Samoa Constitution

Samoa (or Western Samoa as it was then known) was the first independent Pacific Island nation, achieving independence from New Zealand in 1962.<sup>1</sup> Since the missionaries arrived in 1828, Christianity flourished and became the overwhelmingly dominant religion. Visitors today are immediately struck by the prevalence of large churches throughout the country. In political discourse, as well as the everyday conversations that take place in villages, the urban marketplace, schools, sports fields and cafés, Samoans will confidently and proudly assert that the Independent State of Samoa, to give it its full title, is a Christian country.

This article explores to what extent Samoa is a Christian state and the significant role of the churches in Samoan life. The word ‘state’ is here taken to signify the set of governmental institutions or public legal authorities within a country. In Weberian terms, the state is ‘a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory’.<sup>2</sup> The Samoan Constitution 1960 (*O le Fa’avae o le Malo Tutoatasi o Samoa*), Article 3, defines ‘the State’ to include ‘the Head of State, Cabinet, Parliament and all local and other authorities established under any law’. The Constitution carefully distinguishes between the ‘state’ (*o le Mālō*, in the Samoan text), the ‘nation’ or ‘country’ (*atunu’u*) and the ‘culture and customs’ of the people (*agānu’u*).

Although the main focus is on the ‘Christian-ness’ or otherwise of the State of Samoa, this article also goes on to say something about whether it is a Christian ‘nation’. The two

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<sup>1</sup>It is a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, as modified by Samoa custom, with a population of 180,741 (2006 Census) and occupying a land area of 2934 km<sup>2</sup>. Upolu, the smaller of the two main islands (Savai’i is the other), is home to nearly three-quarters of Samoa’s population and its capital, Apia.

<sup>2</sup>Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’ 77, 78 (original emphasis).

concepts (state and nation) are distinct but also related and reinforce each other. The different nuances of the term 'Christian' will become clear as the article unfolds. The discussion will follow the contours of Hugh Heclo in his excellent article, 'Is America a Christian nation?'<sup>3</sup> and, in broad fashion, apply his template to Samoa. Unlike the United States and other Western countries, there is a dearth of survey and empirical evidence on Samoan practices, attitudes and beliefs. In the light of that, the second half of the article contains more than the usual number of assertions and conclusions based on the author's personal experience and observation.<sup>4</sup>

This article adopts a simple political typology based on the substance and form of a State.<sup>5</sup> A 'type 1' Christian state is one where both form and substance coincide. In outward legal *form* it is Christian and in *substance* it reflects Christian values and teachings. A theocracy, or more accurately, an 'ecclesiocracy' or 'clerocracy' is the example *par excellence*. The state is under the control of clerics or religious leaders to further their particular religious agenda. The early Jewish nation, Geneva under Calvin and various Islamic states around the world today, such as Iran (answerable to a council of Muslim scholars), are examples of type 1 religious states.

A 'type 2' Christian state has the *form* but not the substance. A symbolic or nominal type 2 Christian state is one where there is some express, formal and official recognition of God as the source or foundation of the nation, but there is little or no substantive basis to this profession, in the sense that Christian ideals and values, ideals presented in Scripture or church dogma, are governing when it comes to passing laws and shaping public policy in general. For instance, the Canadian Constitution's preamble states that Canada is 'founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God' but, as we shall see, that statement does not require Canadian public policy to conform to Christian precepts.

We might then identify a 'type 3' or *de facto* Christian state where there is the *substance* but not the form of a Christian state. Here the core principles and ideals of Christianity are present in the laws and institutions of the state without any formal acknowledgement or entrenchment of Christianity *per se* as the national religion. Arguably, Western nations with no established church or churches, such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States, until relatively recently, were of the type 3 kind. So the forms of a religious state differ: from the formal, *de jure*, to the informal, *de facto* kind; and from the purely symbolic or nominal in contrast to the substantive sort.

### Samoa as a *de jure* Christian state

Is Samoa a Christian state in a formal, legal (*de jure*) constitutional sense? The answer is 'No'. There is nothing in the Constitution that *expressly* says Christianity is the official religion of Samoa, having rights and privileges above any other faith. There are none of the traditional markers of a religious establishment that we find in nations that do have a state church or faith.<sup>6</sup> Nothing in the Constitution says the law must not conflict with the Christian religion. There is no committee or council of religious leaders that must approve proposed legislation. There is no religious test for public office – one does not have to be a

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<sup>3</sup>Heclo, 'Christian Nation?'

<sup>4</sup>Despite being a non-resident Samoan citizen, the author's assessments are based on his marriage to a born-and-bred Samoan, his Samoan father and step-mother, his extended family, and six visits to Samoa, the latest (in 2011) comprising residence for one calendar year.

<sup>5</sup>See Ahdar, 'A Christian State?', 453–4.

<sup>6</sup>See further Ahdar and Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 75–84.

Christian to be a Member of Parliament, judge, CEO of a government department and so on. Full rights of citizenship do not depend upon profession of Christianity. There is, importantly, a guarantee of religious freedom in the Constitution. There is no public taxation to support the construction or maintenance of church buildings or the living expenses of clergy. The government does not select the bishops or other religious leaders. The Constitution is silent on these matters and their non-inclusion is significant. If these were critical concerns there would have been ample opportunity to include them when the draft constitution was being extensively debated.

There is one major caveat. Samoans, when confronted with this denial that Samoa is a Christian state, immediately point to the Preamble to the Constitution. It reads, in material part:

**IN THE HOLY NAME OF GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, THE EVER LOVING**

**WHEREAS** sovereignty over the Universe belongs to the Omnipresent God alone, and the authority to be exercised by the people of Samoa within the limits prescribed by His commandments is a sacred heritage;

**WHEREAS** the Leaders of Samoa have declared that Samoa should be an Independent State based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and tradition.

The international case law consistently holds that the role ascribed to preambles in constitutions is limited to that of an interpretive guide:

In its constitutional setting, a preamble can fulfil two important functions. First, in its symbolic aspect, a preamble can capture and chart, in a pithy and quotable form, the history and aspirations of a nation. Although *a preamble does not create substantive rights and obligations*, its symbolic aspect may *assist in the interpretation* of the constitution itself by *providing normative guidance*. Thus, in its second, justiciable aspect, a preamble can be used in constitutional interpretation and in the construction of statutes and the development of the common law as a legally useful statement of fundamental values.<sup>7</sup>

The limited role of preambles as purely interpretive guides is part of the common law tradition.<sup>8</sup> In a very few nations, constitutional preambles *do* confer substantive rights – France and Nepal, for example<sup>9</sup> – but the common law countries (the United Kingdom, United States, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and so on) have never accepted this possibility. It may be that there is a global trend toward giving preambles more substantive force,<sup>10</sup> but it would, in the author’s opinion, require very clear parliamentary intent before the traditional interpretive-only role of the Samoan Preamble could be expanded.

Rather than a lengthy survey, it will suffice to take two illustrative nations. In Canada, the Preamble to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms 1982 ‘affirm[s] that the Canadian Nation is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God’. Courts have given this part of the Preamble little or no weight. The Ontario Court of Appeal commented: ‘Whatever meaning may be ascribed to the reference in the preamble to the “supremacy of God”, it cannot detract from the freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed by s. 2(a).’<sup>11</sup> The British Columbia Court of Appeal dismissed the Preamble as a ‘dead letter’ into which the Court had ‘no authority to breath life’.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup>McKenna, Simpson, and Williams, ‘First Words’, 382–3 (italics added).

<sup>8</sup>Orgad, ‘Preamble’, 723–4.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 726.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 738.

<sup>11</sup>Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education, 1988 CanLII 189 (ON CA); (1988) 52 DLR (4th) 577).

<sup>12</sup>R v. Sharpe [1999] BCJ No 1555, §§ 78 to 80.

In *O'Sullivan v. Canada*, Justice Muldoon embarked on an interesting discussion. The case concerned the right of a taxpayer who claimed the right to withhold \$50 of his income tax in protest at the use of public money to fund abortions. In the Federal Court's opinion, the Preamble could 'hardly' mean that Canada had been transformed into a theocracy. Had it been inserted a century or so ago 'it might have been taken to mean that Canada was a Christian state, or kingdom'. But its insertion could not mean Canada had been magically transformed into a religious state:

[T]he late amendment to the Charter in 1981 cannot be construed to have converted Canada into a Roman Catholic theocracy, a Mennonite theocracy, an Anglican theocracy or a Jehovah's Witnesses' theocracy any more than Canada was thereby converted into an Islamic theocracy (whether Sunnite or Shiite), a Hindu theocracy, a Sikh theocracy, or a Buddhist theocracy. What then is meant by this preamble? Obviously it is meant to accord security to all believers in God, no matter what their particular faith and no matter in what beastly manner they behave to others. In assuring that security to believers, this recognition of the supremacy of God means that, unless or until the Constitution be amended [...] *Canada cannot become an officially atheistic state*, as was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or as the Peoples' Republic of China is understood to be.<sup>13</sup>

In modern, secularised Canada 'courts and academics have treated the Preamble, especially in its reference to the "supremacy of God", as an embarrassment to be ignored'.<sup>14</sup>

More relevant to the South Pacific is a recent decision of the Vanuatu Supreme Court. In *President of the Republic of Vanuatu v. Speaker of Parliament*<sup>15</sup> the question was whether a Family Protection Bill that banned acts of 'domestic violence' was invalid based on its claimed inconsistency with the statement in the Preamble to the Vanuatu Constitution that referred to 'Christian principles'. To give it a slightly fuller context, the Preamble reads: 'WE the people of Vanuatu [...] HEREBY proclaim the establishment of the united and free Republic of Vanuatu founded on traditional Melanesia values, faith in God, and Christian principles.' Such principles, it was argued, included the right of parents to physically chastise their children. The Court held that a ban on domestic assault did not prevent *reasonable* physical discipline by parents in accordance with their Christian beliefs and so there was no inconsistency. Chief Justice Vincent Lubanek, drawing from 'the general structure and design of the Constitution' noted these features:

The Preamble is kept separate from the body of the Constitution.  
 The Preamble is not assigned an article number.  
 The Preamble is expressed in general, poetic and aspirational language whereas the balance of the text of the Constitution... is much more prosaic.  
 No other part of the Constitution makes reference to any part of the Preamble.  
 No part of the Preamble is amplified elsewhere in the Constitution.

These led him to conclude that:

The Preamble is symbolic rather than functional.  
 The various statements in the Preamble were designed to capture the spirit of newly-established independence and the founders' ethos.  
 The Preamble has no more than an interpretative role.

Whatever its precise operation, the Preamble is distinct from the regular machinery of the Constitution and should not be ascribed the same effect as an operative provision.

<sup>13</sup>(1991) 81 DLR (4th) 124, 134 (italics added).

<sup>14</sup>Brown, 'Freedom From?', 561.

<sup>15</sup>[2008] VUSC 77; Constitutional Case 06 of 2008 (November 22, 2008).

This case applies squarely to Samoa. The five features that mark the Vanuatu Constitution mirror those of Samoa's Constitution. The same conclusion would seem to follow: the Preamble is a symbolic, aspirational statement that may assist with the interpretation of the Constitution, but it is not an operative provision, not a wording that confers substantive rights upon citizens or imposes duties upon the state.

This was the understanding of the framers of the Constitution some 50 years ago. Lauofo Meti, the Research Secretary of the Working Committee on Self-Government, that oversaw the formation of the Constitution, explained:

The Preamble was the last part of the constitution to be drafted and discussed. The agreed text contained those values which are close to the heart of every Samoan: God, Custom and Tradition [...]

There was also the thought that the customs and usages of the people were now judged by Christian principles. Those dictated their acceptability and whatever their interpretation, *the rights of the people were in any case embodied in the constitution itself and there was therefore no need to be overly concerned as the Preamble was not legally binding.*<sup>16</sup>

In a recent Court of Appeal decision, the Court affirmed the interpretive function: 'The Samoan Constitution is to be construed in the light of its preamble which begins with the sacred heritage that authority is to be exercised by the people of Samoa within the limits prescribed by the commandments of God.'<sup>17</sup> The Court of Appeal has cautioned strongly against recognition of brand new rights based on the Preamble alone, especially where they conflict with the operative provisions:

Although the Constitution is the supreme law and although it is to be read generously, the Courts do not have the power or ability to go beyond the clear and unequivocal words used. *General words in the Preamble are not a mechanism whereby the Courts can extend beyond the clear boundaries contained in the Constitution.* The Preamble sets the scene within which the powers and responsibilities established by the Constitution are to be exercised, but they are not a general licence to avoid the clear words which have been employed.<sup>18</sup>

No one could seriously argue, for example, that a Muslim in Samoa should be denied employment by a government entity because he or she is a non-Christian or that a Hindu community be denied a resource consent to build a temple, by simply appealing to the Preamble and 'God's Commandments' and 'Christian principles'. The Constitution itself has an operative provision, Article 11, that guarantees freedom of religion, as well as Article 15 that protects against religious and other forms of discrimination.

There has been a steady flow of court decisions on Article 11 that amply demonstrate that the article has some real teeth.<sup>19</sup> The courts have consistently vindicated the rights of individuals to exercise their religious freedom.<sup>20</sup> The recurring factual pattern has been the expulsion of village members by the village council after the former commence a new church in direct violation of the council's edict that there be no more places of worship

<sup>16</sup>Meti, *Samoa: The Making of a Constitution*, 63–4 (italics added).

<sup>17</sup>*Samoa Party v. Attorney General* [2010] WSCA 4 (May 7, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>*Mulitalo v. Attorney-General of Samoa* [2001] WSCA 8 (December 20, 2001) (italics mine).

<sup>19</sup>Article 11 reads: '11. Freedom of religion (1) Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in a community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.' Article 11(2) permits 'reasonable restrictions' upon religious freedom in the interests of national security, public order, health, morals, or to safeguard the rights of others to exercise their religion.

<sup>20</sup>See Ahdar, 'The Scope of the Right of Religious Freedom in Samoa' for a full analysis of the cases.

established in that locality. Some villages still insist that only one denomination be permitted and that any more churches would disturb the peace and harmony that the village has long enjoyed. The courts have consistently reminded the village authorities that the Constitution is supreme and they will not permit blatant restrictions on citizens' freedom of worship: such actions (as banning new churches) 'are clearly an infringement of the plaintiffs' fundamental right conferred and preserved under Article 11(1) of the Constitution'.<sup>21</sup> Arguments that ceilings on the number of churches are a 'reasonable restriction' under Article 11(2) have not been accepted, rather the recalcitrant village leaders 'must learn to tolerate and respect the religious beliefs of others even though such beliefs may be different from one's own religious beliefs'.<sup>22</sup>

The Preamble cannot take away rights set out in the body of the Constitution. At most, the Preamble can clarify an ambiguous wording or illuminate the meaning of texts. So, to take an easy example, if a statute made reference to 'Scripture', the Preamble could be invoked to pinpoint more precisely just what was meant here. In this example, 'Scripture' would – given the reference to 'Christian principles' in the Preamble – most likely mean the Christian scriptures or the Bible, not, say, the *Qur'an*.

Take another example, a harder one. Recent letters and articles to the leading newspaper, the *Samoa Observer*, argued that sodomy should not be decriminalised in Samoa because it is a 'nation founded on God' and the country is based on 'Christian principles'.<sup>23</sup> The first reason is legally invalid as the National Motto ('Samoa is founded on God') is not found in the Constitution. The second argument seeks to invoke the Preamble as a basis for legal change or, in this case, preservation of the *status quo*. Let us assume for the moment that sodomy *is* contrary to Christian principles. This, in and of itself, does not give citizens a right to bring a lawsuit to challenge the constitutionality of any new abolition of sodomy bill. Nor does it give the Samoa *Fa'afafine* Association (the body representing indigenous transvestites and homosexuals) the right to bring an action challenging the current criminal ban based on *their* understanding of Christianity. Neither side can invoke Christian principles in their cause because the Preamble is not an operative provision or a source of substantive rights or duties.

### **Samoa as a *de facto* Christian state**

Recall the definition of a 'type 3' Christian state as one where the core principles and values of Christianity are present in the laws and institutions of the state without any formal entrenchment of Christianity itself as the national religion. There is little doubt that the substance of much Samoan law reflects Christian doctrines and precepts. The current proposal by the Samoa Law Reform Commission to reform parts of the Crimes Ordinance 1961 highlights this. In the Preface to the Report, the Commission made a point of acknowledging that the nation's primary faith was 'a paramount consideration' in its deliberations:

The Commission would like to express that it is mindful that Samoa is a country founded on God: 'E Faavae i le Atua'. *The Christian basis of Samoan society is a paramount consideration in the Commission's development of options for reform.* Where there has been conflict between reinforcing Christian values and modernisation, the Commission has sought

<sup>21</sup>*Sefo v. Attorney-General* [2000] WSSC 18 (July 12, 2000) (Wilson J).

<sup>22</sup>*Lafaiali'i v. Attorney-General* [2003] WSSC 8 (April 24, 2003) (Sapolu CJ).

<sup>23</sup>See e.g. Marieta Ilalio, 'Church Attacks Reforms', *Samoa Observer*, September 6, 2011. The newspaper can be accessed at <http://www.samoaoobserver.ws/>.

to balance the role of the criminal law with other options for deterring socially reprehensible conduct through families and the villages. None of the Commission's recommendations should be interpreted as endorsing or morally sanctioning unchristian conduct.<sup>24</sup>

The current criminal code reflects Christian teaching.<sup>25</sup> Alongside the bans we would find in virtually every human society, Christian, secular or otherwise – criminalisation of theft, forgery, assault, rape, murder, arson, kidnapping and so on – one sees the identification of criminal offences that are distinctly Christian in purpose and character.<sup>26</sup> I have mentioned the ban on sodomy (ss 58D, 58E).<sup>27</sup> There are also criminal prohibitions on adultery (ss 58, 58A), bigamy (s 74A), incest (s 49), bestiality (s 58F), solicitation and brothel-keeping (ss 58J to M), impersonating a female (s 58N), witchcraft (s 95), abortion (s 73), counselling suicide (s 75) and blasphemy (s 42).<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, many of these crimes are consistently ignored and not enforced by the police. But the point is that the unmistakable Christian nature of their identification cannot be denied.

The traffic is not all one way. Recently, Samoa changed from difficult-to-obtain, fault-based divorce to easy, no-fault divorce.<sup>29</sup> Limited Sunday trading is now allowed. And there is recent legislation authorising the establishment of casinos (the Casino and Gambling Control Act 2010). Yet overall, and not without some hesitation, one could say that the general tenor of most laws in Samoa is derived from and reflects Christian teachings and beliefs.

### Demography: self-identification

Turning now to consider whether and in what sense, Samoa is a Christian *nation*, it is evident that, in terms of self-identification, the people of Samoa are overwhelmingly Christian. The results from the latest Census in 2006<sup>30</sup> reveal that around 99.3% identify with some form of Christianity, very broadly defined, or 85.2% belong to a Christian denomination, strictly defined. Mormons (13.3%) and Jehovah's Witnesses (0.8%) are not counted under this latter, 'tight' definition of orthodox, credal Christianity. The Congregational Church of Samoa has the highest proportion of members in the total population five years and over, comprising 33.8%, followed by Roman Catholics with 19.6% and Methodists with 14.3%.

<sup>24</sup>*Crimes Ordinance 1961*. Report 01/10. June 2010, at 3 (my italics).

<sup>25</sup>To be accurate, the Samoan criminal code is modelled very closely on New Zealand's Crimes Act 1961. The prevailing New Zealand legislation at the time of Independence (1962) was the wholesale template for the early Samoan legislation. At that time the New Zealand criminal law itself largely reflected Christian teaching. Thus, Samoa's replication of it would have been seamless and entirely consistent with Samoan society's Christian character and commitment.

<sup>26</sup>For the Christian teaching on sodomy, adultery, witchcraft and the other offences listed in this paragraph, see e.g. Johnson and Jordan, 'Christianity'; Shannon, 'Christianity'; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

<sup>27</sup>For the Scriptural roots of the condemnation of homosexuality see e.g. Lev. 18.22; Rom. 2. 6–7.

<sup>28</sup>On Scriptural sources see e.g. Exod. 20.14, Matt. 5.28 (adultery); Lev. 18.7–20, 1 Cor. 5. 1, 4–5 (incest); Lev. 18.23 (bestiality); Prov. 5; Prov. 23.27 (prostitution); Deut. 22.5 (impersonation of other sex); Exod. 22.18 (witchcraft); Jer. 1.5; Ps. 139, 13–16 (abortion); Lev. 24.16; Jude 1, 8–10 (blasphemy). On the condemnation of suicide and assisting suicide, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras 2280–3.

<sup>29</sup>Section 7(1) of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Ordinance 1961, as amended by the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Amendment Act 2010.

<sup>30</sup>Samoa Bureau of Statistics, *Samoa: Population and Housing Census Report 2006*.



### Christianity as a source of moral guidance

There do not appear to be any surveys that ask Samoans rather personal questions such as: 'How much do you rely upon Christian faith for moral guidance?' or 'How much do the Bible or church teachings direct your daily decisions?'

From the United States, there is evidence that although a large percentage of the population identify themselves as Christians, only about a quarter of Americans admit they base their moral decisions on the principles and teachings of their faith.<sup>31</sup> It should not surprise that in such a quintessentially individualistic culture, most people decide themselves what is right and what their moral standards will be. Any form of higher divine authority has to tailor itself to the individual's desires and needs.<sup>32</sup> The order is: 'What do I want to do?', followed by 'Is there anything in my faith to stop me doing that?'; and not 'What does God want me to do?', followed by 'Is this present course of action consistent with God's will?'

By contrast, if Samoans were asked if Christianity is their moral compass, the vast majority would, in the writer's view, reply firmly, and with a note of indignation, that it is. So we can conclude, 'Yes, Samoa is a Christian nation in this sense.'

### Belief in Christian doctrines

Here the question is to what extent Samoans believe the traditional, orthodox Christian doctrines. Do they believe in the classic credal tenets such as the beliefs in one God, the Trinity, the divine creation of the universe and humankind, original sin, the fall of humans, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, his sinless life, his atoning death and so on? Do they accept the Nicene Creed?

Again, from America there is survey evidence that, despite sizeable religious profession, many Americans do not actually believe the core doctrines of the faith. About half of Americans believe Jesus sinned during his life and a majority believe that a person will earn salvation if he or she is 'generally good'.<sup>33</sup> Hecló summarises:

In effect, a vague, triune view of salvation prevails, with entry to eternal heavenly life gained through three gates: by completing a critical mass of good deeds, by accepting God's grace through Jesus Christ, or by counting on God's love for all people. Three-quarters of Americans believe in the intrinsic goodness of human beings, thus denying the basic Christian doctrine of original sin and doing away with any plausible need for a savior to pay for their sins before a holy God. This muddled theology of salvation is not surprising since about half of Americans who say they are Christian also say they believe that all religious faiths teach the same basic principles. None of this corresponds to the authoritative teachings handed down through 2000 years to what the Christian religion held to be true.<sup>34</sup>

Hecló speculates that a loose, 'noncreedal' Christianity fits well with an American culture that extols individual choice and moral freedom, and harbours an ingrained distrust of authority, whether secular or religious.<sup>35</sup>

Again, there is a dearth of survey evidence in Samoa, but the author's impression is that Samoans' acceptance of credal Christianity is higher here than the United States. An indirect, inferential measure of this is Samoa's ban on *The Da Vinci Code* film, after

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<sup>31</sup>Hecló, 'Christian Nation?', 66.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 71.

complaints to the government by church leaders. Catholic and Congregational representatives watched the film at a special pre-release screening. Archbishop Alapati Mataeliga said the movie would affect those of weak faith, causing confusion among Samoan Christians: 'If only the movie was based on the true Gospel, then I think it would not be so bad.'<sup>36</sup> The Government's response to the churches on this occasion was but a visible, if notorious, illustration of the informal and diffuse, yet powerful ongoing influence the churches have upon the State. The churches' views are taken seriously by those parliamentarians and senior civil servants who also fill the role of deacons, elders and committed lay members of the Christian denominations. These intimate and pervasive linkages help reinforce what has always been a close co-operation between the churches and the State in the advancement of societal goals and programmes.

Another brief example of the importance of Christian doctrine occurred in 2011. There were two lengthy and, at times, vitriolic newspaper debates; first, about whether Mormons are really Christians, and next, about the role and status of Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>37</sup> People who do not take Christian doctrine seriously do not bother to debate, and debate vigorously, such things.

### Christianity as expressed in Samoans' behaviour

When it comes to conduct, are Samoans doers and not just hearers of the Word? In terms of rates of churchgoing, it is difficult to find accurate, indeed, any figures, but the author's first-hand impression is that a very large percentage of Samoans attend church weekly. The percentage of Americans attending church services weekly is around 20% (once one allows for persistent over-reporting).<sup>38</sup> A conservative estimate of around 80% plus would be a fair figure for Samoan church attendance. Christian ritual is widely observed throughout Samoan society. Both village life and life in the urbanised capital, Apia, halts at dusk to ensure evening prayers are said in homes. Everywhere one hears church bells ringing at appointed times each day.

Churchgoing is a part of Christian practice but there is more to the Christian life than that. 'Churchianity' is not the same as Christianity. Outside of church, to what extent does Samoans' everyday behaviour reflect Christian teaching? The following is, again, a purely personal, subjective assessment and invokes anecdotal evidence, not rigorous, scientific social data.

There are many kinds of virtuous Christian behaviour but none of them are easy to assess. How does one gauge generosity, charity, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, faithfulness, and so on? On the relief of poverty, there is a recent study that criticises the efforts of the 'mainline' churches (Congregational, Catholic, Methodist) to alleviate the plight of the poorest in modern Samoa. The authors comment:

... the lack of faith-based community or social welfare programmes that serve the immediate material or physical needs of an individual or a community, which are independent from serving the institutional aims of the church itself, may be entirely unique to the practice of

<sup>36</sup>M. Johnson, 'Samoa Bans Da Vinci Code', *Samoa Observer*, May 23, 2006.

<sup>37</sup>See e.g. P. Zukerman, 'Mormon Doctrine of God', *Samoa Observer*, April 17, 2011, versus T. Wilson, 'Fallacies in Mormon Claims', *Samoa Observer*, April 23, 2011 and, on the latter, N.M. Lealaialoto, 'Issues about Virgin Mary', *Samoa Observer*, August 24, 2011, versus Tauamalefili, 'Defender of Mother Mary and her son's church', *Samoa Observer*, August 15, 2011.

<sup>38</sup>Hecló, 'Christian Nation?', 72. See also Paul Harris, 'Rising Atheism in America Puts "religious right on the defensive"', *The Observer* [UK], October 1, 2011.

mainline Christianity in Samoa. As stated in the Samoa National Human Development Report, *Sustainable Livelihoods in a Changing Samoa* (Apia: Centre of Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa, 2006: 43), ‘huge church buildings constructed from church offerings have always taken precedence over the near-poverty-line situation in which church adherents live,’ and ‘the church has yet to help the financial situation of individual members of congregations[.]’ (Samoa National Human Development Report, 41). The mainline churches, as it stands, offer limited concerted programmes for social or community development, beyond those which serve the direct interests of the church itself. This is a role that the church does not recognise as its responsibility. The mainline churches interpret community development as ensuring that the spiritual needs of the congregation are met, while it is the role of the *aiga* [extended family] to look after its own family members who are struggling.<sup>39</sup>

The authors conclude on a more optimistic note that ‘the church in Samoa, as a social trust, has great potential to become a unifying force for bottom–up development, or development from below’<sup>40</sup> to meet the suffering of the poor and landless in an increasingly urbanised society.

An indirect way to gauge Christian conduct is to look at the extent to which vices are prevalent. The basic level of honesty is low. Family-run small businesses in Samoa report that it is very difficult to get honest staff who keep their hands out of the till and off the stock on the shelves. Petty theft and pilfering is rife. Similarly, it is hard to find trustworthy domestic staff (‘house girls’, as they are called) who are not ‘light-fingered’. A great many more homes and businesses have high-security fences now than the writer observed in his first visit from New Zealand 25 years ago. There are plenty of security guards patrolling the shops and banks nowadays too. There is low-level, *ad hoc* graft, bribery, patronage, nepotism and petty corruption. Pesky red-tape requirements can be conveniently overlooked or burdensome paperwork processed more swiftly if you know the right person or make a small ‘contribution’ (monetary or otherwise) to the official. Adultery is not uncommon. Drunkenness is a worsening problem. Recently, Justice Vui Clarence Nelson of the Supreme Court called for the laws governing alcohol consumption and promotion to be reviewed. He made the comment when sentencing a man who struck another with a machete while he was intoxicated.<sup>41</sup> Gambling is popular, both the popular village bingo and the weekly televised Lotto. There are sobering road signs that urge villagers to ‘*Taofi Sauaga*’ (Stop Abuse). There have been many disturbing and heart-breaking cases of fathers and grandfathers convicted of the rape of their daughters and grand-daughters. Recently, the Editor of the *Samoa Observer*, Mata’afa Keni Lesa, lamented:

The growing number of incestuous and indecent assault cases involving young girls is disgraceful. Not a day goes by without a story of a young girl or boy who is sexually abused. Take the newspaper you are reading today for example.[...] Keep in mind that these are only the reported cases, which have made it to court. We don’t know how many other cases are happening every day, unreported. But if this is the number of reported cases, and it is quite a high number judging by the constant stream of stories, then this is *an extremely sad reflection of the moral fiber of our society*.<sup>42</sup>

On the positive side, there is, compared with the West generally, no overt pornography, red-light districts, no gangs or organised crime; prostitution is illegal, abortion and euthanasia are unlawful; there are no moves to decriminalise marijuana.

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<sup>39</sup>Thornton, Kerslake and Binns, ‘Alienation and Obligation’, 9.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>41</sup>Justice Vui Calls for Alcohol Law Review’, *Samoa Observer*, September 29, 2011.

<sup>42</sup>‘Tougher Penalties on Sex Predators’, *Samoa Observer*, February 20, 2011 (my italics).

One hears little profanity and swearing in public and people respect their elders and treat them with courtesy.

Overall then, the answer to the question whether Samoans' behaviour is Christian is 'not really', at its harshest, or 'very patchy', at best. It may be that one is setting a demanding standard, setting the bar unrealistically high.<sup>43</sup> How many believers in any religion actually live by that faith day in and day out in every sphere of their lives? However, that is not the issue. The author did not set the standard, and the moral practices of people in Mongolia, Mexico and Malawi or how well Muslims or Hindus abide by *their* religion is not in point. The issue is how well *Samoans* live up to the demanding strictures of the Christian gospel. The question is all the more acute, for in a nation that trumpets that it is founded on God, deviations from that lofty ideal are going to be much more closely scrutinised.<sup>44</sup>

### Christianity and Samoa's political ethos

The political ethos is 'the persisting tone of public affairs, their moral and aesthetic style and mood'.<sup>45</sup> Samoa's public and political life is heavily imbued with Christian references and trappings, to a degree that would rival, if not surpass, the United States. The National Motto is *Fa'avae i le Atua Samoa* ('Samoa is founded on God'). The National Anthem has the stirring line: *Aua e te fefe; o le Atua lo ta fa'avae, o lota sa'olotoga* ('Do not be afraid; God is our foundation, our freedom.') The Samoa Tourist Authority state under the heading 'Religion': 'Samoa is a Christian nation and the main denominations are – Congregational, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Assembly of God, Seven Days [*sic*] Adventist, Bahai, Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses.'<sup>46</sup> It is also interesting to note this opening sentence in the preface to a major government report: 'First and foremost, all glory and honour is given to God our Father for this Law and Justice Sector Plan.'<sup>47</sup>

It would be unthinkable for a Samoan Prime Minister to declare he or she was not a Christian. By contrast, in New Zealand, several recent Prime Ministers – Sir Geoffrey Palmer, Helen Clark and now John Key – have quite openly admitted they are atheists or agnostics (although they usually hastily add they respect the Christian religion). Both major political parties in Samoa extol the crucial importance of God to their work. The Human Rights Protection Party (the governing party) in its Manifesto for the 2011 General Election concluded:

Only with the help of our Lord God may we achieve our work. All the long term plans set out in this Manifesto, as in all previous plans since the HRPP came into office, rely on our God, the Foundation of Samoa, to help guide us in their actual implementation and outcomes.

The Tautua Samoa Party, the opposition party, was even more specific. Its 2011 Manifesto led with this policy:

GOD FIRST – Full observance of the Sabbath. A ban on any public works and any form of commercial trade on Sunday. Any government decision should be based on observance of Christian values. Main emphasis on Constitutional preamble, '*E faavae i Le Atua Samoa*'.

<sup>43</sup>Heclo, 'Christian Nation?', 68, 75.

<sup>44</sup>See Saada, '*Truly Religious Place?*'

<sup>45</sup>Heclo, 'Christian Nation?', 79.

<sup>46</sup>It might need to revise that since, for one thing, the Bahai'i are not card-carrying Christians.

<sup>47</sup>Samoa Law and Justice Sector, *Justice for a Safe and Stable Samoa*, ii.

### Samoa as a Christian nation: Christianity's own view

From Christianity's own perspective, can a nation be Christian? It is, in the author's view, a mistake to call *any* nation a Christian one. First, as Hecllo maintains, Jesus' own teaching is suggestive.<sup>48</sup> In response to Satan's third temptation in the desert, Jesus does not dispute that it is within Satan's power to give him 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour' (Matt. 4. 8–9). The Apostle John says that 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 John 5.19); their minds, as St Paul explains, are blinded by 'the god of this world [or age]' (2 Cor. 4.4). All the countries of the world are, for now, temporarily, in these 'last days', until he returns, under Satan's proximate control. Further, Jesus in response to Pontius Pilate's probing question about assuming kingship over the embattled Jewish nation, responded that his Kingdom was not of this world (John 18.36).

Second, there is a tendency to take biblical Israel as a relevant pattern or template for nations today. The core assumption here is that a nation can be a 'religious agent', that it can be the sort of entity that can embody or profess the Christian faith and be held accountable to God for its failure to live up to the faith.<sup>49</sup> There is no doubt ancient Israel was such an entity, but there is little or no convincing *biblical* support for the notion that the special covenantal status of Israel extended past the Jewish people to future Gentile nations. (One may discount the possibility that some nations, including neighbouring Fiji, may believe they are direct descendants of the 'lost tribe' of Israel.<sup>50</sup>) God may and does judge all the nations according to his standards (Matt. 25.32), but, as Chaplin argues,

It is to deny that God has anywhere *disclosed* that he has entered into a covenantal relationship with any nation other than Israel, or that other nations are obliged to or even able to reproduce or seek the unique covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Biblically, it seems evident that upon the inauguration of the New Covenant God no longer mediates his redemptive activity in the world via any special relationship with a particular nation or political order.<sup>51</sup>

Many Samoans see the nation as in a special, covenantal (*fa'a feagaiga*) relationship with God. Here is a particularly good example from one correspondent to the *Samoa Observer*:

We all know Samoa is founded upon God. [...] our forefathers decided and agreed that Samoa would be founded upon God, and it was so from [its] declaration of independence. *God is a covenant God and Samoa has an agreement with God.* He will carry out His part of this agreement because He is faithful and He loves Samoa even when she is dead in transgression and sin. [...] It is imperative more than ever before that Samoa honor this agreement that our forefathers entered into with God. *Samoa's failure in keeping her part of the agreement is costly and will bring curses upon Samoa.* Since Samoa is founded upon God, its operation to its entirety should be aligned to the law of God (Bible). The Law Reform Commission's plan to legalize sodomy and adultery is very much against the law of God to [*sic*] Whom Samoa is founded upon [...] God is warning us now as He has warned us before that if sodomy and adultery, amongst other unlawful sexual relations, are legalized in Samoa, the wrath of God to [*sic*] Whom Samoa is founded upon shall surely fall.<sup>52</sup>

In a very broad sense it *is* true that nations are *ultimately* accountable to God and there *are* adverse social consequences to flouting God's laws, albeit not the crude cause-and-effect model of divine punishment by natural disasters for societal moral permissiveness. (The letter writer above had linked the devastating tsunami of September 2009, which

<sup>48</sup>Hecllo, 'Christian Nation?', 84–6.

<sup>49</sup>Chaplin, 'Can Nations be "Christian"?'.

<sup>50</sup>Ryle, 'Christian State Debate in Fiji', 68.

<sup>51</sup>Chaplin, 'Can Nations be "Christian"?', 418 (original emphasis).

<sup>52</sup>Taranaki Mailei, 'It Begins and Ends with God', *Samoa Observer*, September 14, 2011 (italics added).

killed 149 people, to Samoa's departure from God's standards.<sup>53</sup> Such a harsh view is not widely shared by Samoans.) But no modern Gentile nation is on a par with Israel. After biblical Israel was created, God 'broke the mould', so to speak. The role and status of biblical Israel as a divinely inspired and ordered political entity was 'dispensationally unique [and] unrepeatable'.<sup>54</sup> There is little scriptural support for the view that there are (aside from the modern state of Israel) 'chosen' nations today. The elect, the people of God, are a global *trans-national* community.<sup>55</sup> The Church, not the political community, is the true society (*societas perfecta*).<sup>56</sup> There are Christians in all nations, and some countries, like Samoa, have many devout Christians living there, but no *particular* nation can be said to be in a special, covenantal relation with God. If Samoa really was in a covenantal relationship with God it might be rather nervous, for transgressions within its borders always bring God's judgment.

While the State is not the Church and cannot pursue the mission of the Church, this is not to say, as Oliver O'Donovan has argued, that a state cannot facilitate the transmission and outworking of the Gospel.<sup>57</sup> There may be many ways in which a state can assist the Church in its mission. These can be done – albeit it takes great care – without infringing religious freedom, without imposing a theocracy and without committing the entire nation to a strong, binding constitutional confession of Christian faith.<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion

Is Samoa a Christian *state*? No, not in a legal (*de jure*), constitutional sense. It is, however, possible to argue that, yes, in practice, it is a *de facto* Christian state insofar as the substance of much of Samoan law reflects Christian teaching.

Is Samoa a Christian *nation*? In terms of self-identification, yes, most definitely. We can also give a reasonably firm 'yes', to the question whether Christianity is a source of moral guidance for most Samoans. The traditional core doctrinal beliefs of Christianity seem to be widely believed, so another 'yes'. The political culture and ethos is Christian, so 'yes', yet again. In terms of Samoans' obedience to Christian teaching, the verdict is, in the author's opinion, 'no', or at most, 'maybe' or 'somewhat'. Overall, they do a decidedly 'patchy' job of practising what they preach. As judged by Christianity itself, Samoa is not and cannot be a Christian nation. So the final answer is 'not possible'.

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The author is aware that certain areas of the topic are not covered, notably religious observance and instruction in state schools and state funding of religious schools in Samoa. His return to New Zealand thwarted the necessary access to the primary and secondary sources necessary to include these important matters, which remain to be investigated by future researchers.

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid. – he writes, 'Tsunami was no accident but a wakeup call'.

<sup>54</sup>Chaplin, 'Can Nations be "Christian"?', 419.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>McIlroy, 'Right Reason', 301.

<sup>57</sup>O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*.

<sup>58</sup>On 'mild', non-coercive forms of religious establishment, see Ahdar, 'A Christian State?'.

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