

Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:

The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

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Chapter 8: Casimira, Aisake: A battered *Vaka* in Swirling Waters: Ecumenism in Tonga

The Kingdom of Tonga can be considered to be mainly composed of its three main islands, with a vast majority of the approximately 106 000 people (2015 census) living on one of these three. Culturally and geographically, Tonga belongs to the region of Polynesia. There is not a single non-Christian religious group with even smallest influence respectively membership numbers.

Early contact with Christian missionaries has existed since the beginning of the 19th century, and after a period of British rule in the form of a protectorate, Tonga gained full independence in 1970. It is a constitutional monarchy that gives “almost absolute political power” to the king. However, the emergence of a pro-democratic movement has not only reshaped the political landscape of Tonga’s political system by sparking a serious debate about the legitimacy of the current constitution, but also greatly influenced the ecumenical movement in Tonga (as is shown at a later stage of the chapter).

The most important socio – political and economic trends are vital to church leaders because they are automatically issues that need to be addressed by the churches as well.

The system of aristocracy by nature allocates resources unequally, creating “one of the widest gaps between rich and poor in the Pacific”. Unemployment and poverty are remarkably high. Today, this “system of power concentration” is, increasingly fraught with tension, questioned by a pro-democratic movement backed by both an “educated elite” and “a growing number of ordinary people”. Closely connected to this conflict are issues of human rights which have also sparked protest and dissatisfaction ever since the 1970’s. Non-communicable diseases face an overwhelming 99,9% majority of Tongan society and are unfortunately considered to be mainly driven by external influences, which complicates

effective approaches on this issue. Gender-based violence and youths threatened by different ways to get into a social race to the bottom, via unemployment, teenage pregnancy, or alcoholism and drug abuse, are also key challenges that require “serious attention”.

The ecumenical movement in Tonga was in great parts influenced by three outstanding leaders who were responsible for what author Aisake Casimira considers to possibly have been the “most invigorating of the national movements”. All three leaders had in common a special “charisma, passion and determination” by which they made the ecumenical movement in Tonga flourish.

The chapter sets the date of the first serious ecumenical interaction in Tonga on 1973, yet it took another 14 years until the Tonga National Council of Churches (TNCC) was established in 1987. It was originally backed by all major mainline churches and reflects, respectively influenced, the changing course of ecumenism in Tonga. The ecumenical movement during the 1970’s, 1980’s, and 1990’s is considered to have been remarkably active and prospering. This is said to have its main reasons in an unusual strong commitment to ecumenism by the respective leaders at the time who managed to fill other churches with enthusiasm as well as liberating them and their members of fears and animosities regarding the other churches. Accordingly, also the work of TNCC prospered. Particularly highlighted in this aspect are regular meetings of church leaders and especially the dialogue on the BEM document which experienced huge effort and support by TNCC in that time.

Unfortunately, ecumenism ceased to flourish any further after its peak in the 1990s, and TNCC played an important role in this decline. Many interviewees highlight the fact that TNCC became openly involved in the advocacy of democracy and human rights as a “primary reason” for the apparent decrease in ecumenical spirit because not all member churches agreed with this kind of political involvement and therefore withdrew from TNCC.

The direct effects of this decline on an institutional level (the chapter deals with other perspectives at a later stage) are probably best reflected in the establishment of the Tonga Church Leaders Forum (TCLF). Unlike TNCC, TCLF focuses on social development rather than doctrinal dialogue, even including the substantially opposing Pentecostal Churches. The fact that the government even has seats in TCLF, and is therefore closely interconnected with it, is another sign of TCLF’s mere focus on development issues. Regarding this intended avoidance of matters of faith, author Aisake Casimira argues that, despite of “engaging in the development needs of the people” being “a mission mandate”, there is an indispensable need for “underlying moral principles” in order to prevent “a loss of identity and relevance”. According to Mr Casimira, this loss might eventually act contrary to original purposes because it will also apply to the people themselves and therefore deepen “people’s vulnerability to injustice and exploitation”.

The scope of field work represents the mainline churches very well but lacks voices from new religious group and the Mormon Church. There was also limited access to written documents on the history of ecumenism.

The analysis of field research has revealed the following results:

Ecumenism is broadly understood as a “biblical mandate”, a call for the churches to seek unity (based on John 17:21), which is in reality reflected by the wish for continuous dialogue on the relationship between faith and all relevant aspects of life. Despite of some minor variations, the chapter states that there is general agreement in Tonga on an understanding that includes the responsibility for fellow human beings, the environment, and thus God’s entire creation.

The chapter also assesses the present state of ecumenism. It re-emphasizes the huge extend to which ecumenism used to flourish in its early days. Ecumenism was very lively within TNCC, with frequent, regular meetings and dialogue. This spirit spread out to village level, sparking an atmosphere of frequently shared prayer and worship. As mentioned previously, this spirit lasted until the end of the 1990s when ecumenism began to lose its “visibility, vitality and influence”, one of the reasons being the political involvement of TNCC’s general secretary. The chapter emphasizes that this reflects a conflict in the Tongan context on how to sustain a healthy balance between practically oriented cooperation with the government and maintaining a “prophetic role” as voice of Christian world views and values in regards to government decisions.

The chapter also names further reasons for the decline of ecumenism.

It argues that due to the institutionalization of ecumenism, a danger of decline inevitably exists because the nature of an institution, which includes the need to acquire resources and set up of programs, requires it to put more emphasis on the pure maintenance of itself (e.g. the institution). Thus, the institution can tend to become less creative and innovative. The need of fundraising in Tonga has additionally, according to some interviewees, made the churches be more occupied with material issues instead of using the Spirit to extend their ecumenical movement. This is also closely connected to the fact that the increased focus on fundraising has also led to a stronger emphasize on development issues, which has led to a current lack of dialogue on matters of faith. This has then ultimately, as author Aisake Casimira argues, “undermined the mission mandate”. Viliame Falekaono puts this into a nutshell: “...the church no longer sees it itself as missionary but [as] institutional, and when you begin to see yourself as such, your priority is maintenance.”

The chapter emphasizes that the inclusion of dialogue on matters of faith has been a key factor for the success of ecumenism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This dialogue was eventually carried out by outstanding leaders whose level of vision, passion and determination has not been reached again. Especially dialogue on the BEM document is regarded as an intrinsic condition for strengthened relations and therefore also improved capacities to tackle development issues. The chapter also reemphasizes the role played by the political involvement of TNCC. Author Aisake Casimira argues that, also considering its causes, this particular decline has resulted in an attitude towards ecumenism that is neither capable of enhancing people in matters of faith, nor is it acknowledging that ecumenism itself can be a valuable contributor in the promotion of social change.

The issues and challenges for ecumenism in Tonga derive automatically from the analysis above and could be summed up as the following:

There is a strong need for new leaders with lively vision. The theological aspect of leaders' education tends to be neglected, and the chapter indicates that the institutional structure in Tonga causes the churches to feel either too much or too little responsibility for the success of their tasks. This is because it is argued that TNCC should merely sponsor and supervise development activities whereas TCLF suffers from a lack of commitment to its work because the money is fully provided by the government.

The several social issues also depict massive challenges for the churches. There is a need to "link ecumenical dialogue and development", which is considered to be the only truly effective way for the churches to fulfill their role as stewards.

The relationship between church and state needs to be reassessed, under serious consideration of the current movement for democratic reforms. The question of how to combine ancient traditions and understandings with modern societal overall concepts needs to be raised and responded to just as well as practical and imminent problems concerning youths. Another issue is the challenge of new religious groups which are offensively trying to woo away members from the mainline churches.

Some interview partners also mention challenges at regional level, mainly concerning the ecumenical bodies PCC and PTC. Critics state that PCC is more interested in maintaining itself than in actually supporting the churches in their journey to broader and better ecumenical cooperation, and that there are management problems deriving from the fact that those in respective positions have not experienced sufficient training in management skills.

Regarding PTC, it is expressed by some interviewees that the college should put greater emphasis on training the future leaders in terms of "biblical morality and ethics, theology and administration skills" (Rev. T. Havea).

Proposals for a joint "Pacific Ecumenical" council experience support from some interviewees, mainly due to increased effectiveness, whereas other interview partners emphasize the distinct "goals, functions and membership" whose dissolution would inhibit progress rather than enhance it.

Even though the current state of ecumenism is considered to be "depressing", hope is still expressed that a turnaround might succeed. However, this will require a general renewal. This renewal could be achieved by strengthening Tongan Youth as well as approaching the previously mentioned factors of insufficient leadership and lack of dialogue on doctrinal matters. On regional level, the chapter indicates that less competition for resources in favor of better relationships could also help revive the ecumenical spirit.

The chapter concludes that even though ecumenism has remarkably declined, the "sociopolitical and economic context of Tonga" makes ecumenism more needed than ever. The chapter indicates that the weakening of social networks by increasing freedom, reflected particularly in "consumerization" in particular, depicts the biggest social challenge for the churches. The chapter recognizes a struggle between different understandings of ecumenism that needs to be resolved.

The chapter recommends to initiate a discussion on the issues and problems elaborated and during its course. It is furthermore recommended to strengthen Tongan Youth and to “establish a platform for dialogue and collective action by member churches of both the TNCC and the TLCF on mission and development issues”. It finally recommends to institute discussions on the appropriate responses to social issues as well as possible structural renewal of the regional ecumenical movement and its bodies.

Vincent Gewert, Volunteer at the Institute for Mission and Research, PTC