

# Finding Harmony between Decolonization and Christianity in Academia

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Article abstract

This article presents our theoretical musings on practicing decolonization as Christian Tongan academics, recorded and shared within our Australian collective during 2022-2023. We aim to discuss the strength and power that comes from our Indigenous inheritance of God and Tonga, living in diaspora of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (tu'a Tonga). Amidst this Indigenous strength, there are also subtleties and crescendos of coloniality taking place in and around us, as well as the complexities and vulnerabilities with which Tongan Christian academics grapple in their sense making and meaning making processes. The significance of this discussion is that Oceanian women's opinions and experiences of decoloniality are not often considered, particularly within the contexts of academia. We pray this article offers insights into how we can successfully navigate simultaneous private, public, individual, and collective journeys, daily, as Christian academics in the decolonization of these various spaces. This is our contribution as Christian academics, as daughters of Tonga, and wives and mothers of Oceania.





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## FINDING HARMONY BETWEEN DECOLONIZATION AND CHRISTIANITY IN ACADEMIA

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inclusivity, and reshaping the narrative of academic success for those who are unrepresented in higher education. A faithful servant of God planted in scripture, she acknowledges the Pulela'ā Tongan Methodist Church, Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Abstract:** This article presents our theoretical musings on practicing decolonization as Christian Tongan academics, recorded and shared within our Australian collective during 2022-2023. We aim to discuss the strength and power that comes from our Indigenous inheritance of God and Tonga, living in diaspora of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (tu'a Tonga). Amidst this Indigenous strength, there are also subtleties and crescendos of coloniality taking place in and around us, as well as the complexities and vulnerabilities with which Tongan Christian academics grapple in their sense making and meaning making processes. The significance of this discussion is that Oceanian women's opinions and experiences of decoloniality are not often considered, particularly within the contexts of academia. We pray this article offers insights into how we can successfully navigate simultaneous private, public, individual, and collective journeys, daily, as Christian academics in the decolonization of these various spaces. This is our contribution as Christian academics, as daughters of Tonga, and wives and mothers of Oceania.

**Keywords:** anga faka-Tonga; Christian academics; collective-individual; decolonization; spiritual being and spirituality; tu'a Tonga; vā

## The Vā<sup>1</sup> In-between University and the Creator

Dear University

Thank you for admitting me into your space

To accept your worldviews

To learn your theories and pedagogies

To memorize your philosophers

To be measured by your standards

To access your scholarships

To understand your language

To adhere to your behaviours

To aspire to your success

To elevate your systems, to gradually question mine.

To God be the Glory - Alpha and Omega

Thank You for Your guidance and protection

To journey in these spaces

To seek and share Your truth

By Your grace

In Your faith

To receive Your salvation

To rely on Your provision

To elevate Your presence

To know I am Loved

That You are free to access

To live by YOUR desire and not my own.

(A poem by Cathleen Hafu-Fetokai, shared with co-authors, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 2023)

Within academia, we may often feel bound by the knowledge and expectations of these man-made institutes (Leenen-Young et al., 2021). Cathleen's opening poem speaks to this truth. Such a quandary can consume us, our thoughts, and actions, and affect how empowered and liberated we feel to address matters that we encounter daily—even as Christians in academia. On the other hand, we are also aware that the God we serve is boundless; there is no limit to His grace, love, hope, and desire for us all to have eternal life. As Christians, with this freedom of knowing who our Creator is, we have an eternity-bound perspective, freed from the limitations of scholarly debates (Chappell, 1995; Makasiale, 2023; Thaman, 2003) and human labels—our freedom is based on eternal truths.

Decolonization. What does this concept mean for us as practicing Christians navigating academia, while maintaining our stand as Tongan women, who have been freed

by the truth? These intersecting identities as Christian, as Tongan, as women, as mothers, and as academics impact how we understand the decolonizing that is occurring. Lātūkefu (1975) declared, “My own little country, Tonga, has borrowed a lot from the outside world, the British in particular. But we have made the borrowed elements our own, and there is no question as to the distinctiveness of our own culture” (p. 20). It is this ownership, and the distinctiveness of that which has been borrowed from the outside to become our own, that enables us to find harmony between Christianity and decolonization. Our positionality is grounded in an eternal perspective that is free from the earthbound limitations of scholarly debates and human labels. To carry an eternal perspective is to not be colour-bound. We acknowledge that truth has come freely from the Creator, through various people at various times during our history. The focus has not been on those messengers but on The Message, and on the origins of It being the Creator.

In terms of decolonizing university spaces, we take encouragement from Jackson (2019): “However, in the end, decolonization simply means having the faith that we can still be brave enough to change imposed reality” (p. 101). Decolonizing often refers to the multifaceted process aimed at addressing and rectifying the historical and on-going impacts of colonialization on higher education. It involves challenging and dismantling the colonial ideologies, structures, and practices that have shaped academia (Leenen-Young et al., 2021). As Tongan Christian women in academia, we are decolonizing the knowledge and practices within the institution that seek to understand the world through empirical evidence and logical reasoning. Our approach to decolonization is through the application of Christian principles and the personal *vā* (or relationship) we have with our Creator. This faith ultimately frees us from the limitations of our cognitive capacity. We collectively believe this discussion provokes an alternative form of thinking that can be transformative for those of us who are open and willing to both decolonize and Christianise.

## **Interweaving Conversations and Concepts**

The following thematic groupings of excerpts are taken from our *talatalanoa* (free flowing and ongoing dialogue; Fa’avae & Fonua, 2021), *e-talanoa* (online conversations; Fa’avae et al., 2022a; Faleolo, 2023a), brain dumps (free-form reflexive writing), and *talaloto* (a talk from the heart, personal testimony; Naufahu, 2018). These conversations occurred in 2022-2023, as part of an overarching project from which this information has been drawn.

Excerpts have been interwoven here (with permission from the authors), providing insights into thought processes, personal monologues, private interactions, public presentations, and from within our safe spaces of Tongan online collective-individuals. These interwoven excerpts convey how we practice decoloniality, and how we have come to terms

with it within ourselves, unperturbed by the competing contentious noise of academia, social media, or the dominant cultural voices in our diaspora (tu'a Tonga) contexts.

Key concepts have emerged, such as vā with the Creator and creation; anga faka-Tonga; collective-individual; competition versus creating space; and vā created in vao. We will outline these concepts, but first, we open in a culturally familiar way, through lotu (prayer).

### **Cathleen's Prayer**

Eiki, mālō hoo 'ofa. Mālō e ma'u ha faingamalie (Lord, thank You for Your love, and the opportunity) to boldly share how You have allowed me and equipped me to navigate university spaces without compromising Your presence in my life. May I continue to seek Your guidance and be reminded of Colossians 3:17 “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Amplified Bible, 1965). ‘Emeni. God, thank You for this opportunity that I may share how we have journeyed together, specifically in academia; that it may enlighten others to know You, and for me to be reminded of Your everlasting presence.

### **Ruth's Prayer**

Lord, I thank You, for Your love fills the earth. I see it when I look up into the blue sky and see the tall Australian gum trees greeting me outside my window, daily. I see it when the sun sets, and the amber peachy sky, imbued with dusky purples, accentuates the silhouettes of buildings and streets I call home. But, between You and me, I really yearn to be in my eternal home, some sweet day. For now, please teach me to keep Your ways; at home, at work, in my community, and in my thought life, in quiet times, known only to You. I have seen the good You have done for my family; in our journey together, even when things get tough, we can be rest assured that You are holding us together. Your word is true, Lord. I keep trusting You regardless of what others say. I have known Your presence, Your love and comfort in my life since I was a child. I put my hope and faith in You, eternally. Guide me and teach me Your ways; direct my steps in the spaces I am given to walk in, teach in, research in, serve in. Test me and purify my heart; take away any misunderstandings, misconceptions, and lies. I will not be ashamed of the gospel that so readily and freely saves me from sin. Let me be an instrument of Your Kingdom's work in this space and time. Fakafeta'i lahi 'Eiki! Ke langilangi'ia Koe 'i he me'a kotoa pe. ‘Emeni.

## Inez's Prayer

Lord, I have lived life my way, and whilst I achieved things, there was always a profound emptiness. Ecclesiastes 3:11 states that “He has planted eternity in the human heart. . .” (New King James Version Bible, 1982). It is this “eternity” that I seek, that only an eternal God can fill. I have witnessed Your faithfulness daily, and, in exchange, I commit my life to You, so others can taste and see that the Lord, truly, is good.

## Decolonization Concepts as Tongan Christian Women

We developed key concepts to frame our dialogue as Tongan Christians, as women of Oceania, and as academics working within our Pasifika communities. These concepts relate to themes drawn from our series of talatalanoa that engaged a wider group of Tongan academics who identify as Christian practitioners and are part of an overarching project known as “Living Decoloniality as Practicing Christians.” For this article in particular, important themes were highlighted during our e-talanoa (free flowing dialogue session using Zoom) on 24 June 2023. The five themes that we believe to be relevant to this article's focus are:

- Vā with the Creator and creation
- Anga faka-Tonga
- Collective-individuals
- Competition vs Creating space
- Vā in the vao.

In this discussion we illustrate Tongan/Pasifika notions—such as anga faka-Tonga, vā, and collective-individuals—using various mediums (research literature, poetry, talaloto (personal testimonies), and imagery) to offer holistic expression grounded in Pasifika ways of being, knowing, and doing. These themes and expressions capture the essence of how decolonization and Christianity can work harmoniously in academia for Tongans/Pasifika, as experienced by the authors and their communities. It needs to be noted that, although this article is largely presented from our Tongan lens, we are aware that there are other Oceanians (e.g., fellow Samoan and Māori academics) with similar outlooks on matters of decolonization for themselves and their peoples, within academia as Christians.

## Vā with the Creator and Creation

Nurturing social and sacred relationships starts first with an individual relationship with God. Ihara and Vakalahi (2011) state that:

Spirituality is a complex concept to define and has different meanings for different people. For some, spirituality may reflect an individual's unique connectedness with self, others, and nature. For others, spirituality may refer to one's relationship with God, Creator, or other higher power. (p. 407)

In Fainga'a-Manu Sione's 2022 study, the elders identified themselves as spiritual beings first. In her study, a Pasifika elder named Mary explained, "We are born spiritual beings, to be in balance with all things. Europeans don't know what a spiritual being is. If your wairua (spirit) is harmed, it won't stay, that's why doctors can't explain why one person lives and another dies" (p. 99). Mary's perception reveals the distinction that elders make between Western ideology and their own Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; specifically, regarding their identity as spiritual beings. In a separate conversation with another elder from the study, Alofa (Samoan mother and pastor) echoed this spiritual identity when training thirty leaders. She stated, "We are made spiritual beings first. Psalm 139, when we die our physical body ends and our spiritual being lives on with Christ" (p. 99). This emphasizes the importance of an eternal belief held by Pasifika, including us Tongans, that goes beyond the physical body and life on earth. Semisi, a Tongan male elder in Fainga'a-Manu Sione's study, further explains this eternal perspective, "Tongans don't care about dying because we know Heaven's another place. We are not afraid of death; we know where we are going" (p. 99).

As mentioned earlier, for us Tongan Christian academics, to decolonize means to no longer be bound to the secular, scientific, Western, earthbound confines of a temporal reality, but to explicitly unpack our eternal and spiritual reality as Indigenous people. Our spiritual reality connects us first to the Creator of all things, and second to all creation. Ihara and Vakalahi (2011) confirm this Indigenous belief that "Pacific spiritual ways emphasize the interactions between human, natural, and spiritual worlds" (p. 408). It is what we define as the *vā* between the Creator (God) and creation. This beautiful connection is creatively captured in Figure 1 by Cathleen.



**Figure 1***The Created Acknowledging the Creator*

*Note:* Image created and captured by Cathleen while attending a writing retreat (29th June 2023).

Each of the authors unpack their lived experiences through talaloto, meaning a personal testimony, a methodology that Naufahu (2018) claims “enriches and permits authentic, raw and meaningful information” (p. 15). The authors’ talaloto each reveals how we have established a vā between God the Father, Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (the trinity) and ourselves, as His creation. Using talaloto has been an intentional process, to improve engagement through our use of accessible language and complexity of experience, which is of itself considered a decolonizing approach (McKnight, 2023; Naufahu, 2018). It has been a journey of walking in the secular and spiritual world, simultaneously. We will read how Cathleen’s story of faith, education, and family are interwoven into her academic success; a legacy attributed to her father.

## Cathleen's Talaloto

### 'Otua (God), Ako (education/school), and Famili (family)

I am the daughter of a staunch Tongan father, who strongly believed 'Otua (God), ako (school/education), and famili (family) were prerequisites for a life of service. He, like many other Tongans, moved to Aotearoa New Zealand in search of a milk and honey dream; where access to education would open unlimited opportunities for his children, myself and my two brothers. It is through my educational journey that I discovered a God that is real, faithful, forgiving, constant, and loving.

I first occupied the university space after gaining University Entrance (UE). It was my experience that attending university elevated me to a state of godliness in the eyes of my family, community, church, and peers. The year before this I had repeated 7th form (Year 13), due to failing three subjects—back then, you were required to pass a minimum of three subjects to gain UE. It was a disappointment for my parents. My dad's hopes and dream for his daughter to enter university appeared to be exactly that, only a dream.

A saving grace for me, during this time, was my renewed relationship with God. God and the church have always been a part of my life. It was common for migrant families to be planted in a church in Aotearoa New Zealand; for us, the church was our community, where we fellowshiped, shared, and supported each other, navigating being Tongan in a Palagi (European) world. It was through my active relationship with God that I decided to let go of the ego I had developed, returning to school to repeat Year 13. This was the first time I had experienced true failure, true disappointment, and true embarrassment. I took this as a *lesoni* (lesson) to appreciate that God was preparing me for something beyond my capabilities. A year later, as an undergraduate student who had experienced failure at high school, I was fully committed to succeeding at university, by any means necessary.

As the first in my family to attend university, everything was foreign and overwhelming. I was a good student who attended classes and tutorials but was reluctant to participate in dialogue, in the fear of revealing I did not belong here. I started to spend more time at university than church and read my prescribed readings more than my Bible. Reflecting on this time in my life, the ivory towers of university had become my church, yet God remained my 0800 helpline.

My undergraduate years were the start of this intersectional merging of the worlds of academia and Christianity. I had also prioritized the responsibility to elevate my family socially, economically, and spiritually. I often felt lonely as an individual member of my family

at university, although I was there to advance our collective, and I soon realized the journey in academia was isolating in itself. In all these discoveries, however, God directed me and kept me grounded in His Word. He was present in all facets of my academic life, despite the uncertainty of completing courses, financial responsibilities, relationships, employment . . . I was reassured that

No one will be able to stand their ground against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you. . . I command you—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (New Living Translation Bible, 1996, Joshua 1:5-9)

He would never abandon me, if I kept near to Him, in scripture and prayer.

I have since graduated multiple times and my dad has been present at every graduation; proud, overjoyed, humbled, relieved that his daughter fulfilled his dream of a life of service, through 'Otua, ako, and famili (God, education, and family). My failures are lessons to lean into God, and I believe His vision and plan are far greater than I could ever imagine.

We rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with love. (New Living Translation Bible, 1996, Romans 5:3-5).

Graduation is the highlight for many who attend university. For me, the highlight was having my family members on campus for the first time. What I witnessed on my graduation day is one of the most memorable moments of my life.

When someone graduates from the University of Auckland, all the graduands assemble in their faculties outside the Old Government House, ready to be led in procession by university officials and the pipe band. The route is approximately 1.5 kms, to the Auckland Town Centre, and all the roads leading to the town centre are closed off to vehicles, allowing graduands to walk in the middle of the road. Graduands are advised that no family members or members of the public can join this procession. My dad, however, walked the entire parade, following me along the footpath, sidestepping bystanders, dodging street bins, avoiding marshals in their hi-vis vests, all the while looking over to me with a warm smile. That day, Ongo'a Toloke Hafu graduated. He did not need UE; he did not need to understand Foucault or Marxism. He did not need to complete assessments or sit exams. Instead, he prayed and invested into me growing up, and entering university so that I would have better opportunities in life. Yes, academia has afforded me many opportunities; however, it was my dad who had done so much for me, uplifting our family and acknowledging God's work in me so that ako would become my purpose—serving my

community in promoting others into higher education so that they could also realize the unlimited opportunities afforded to them and their families.

Dad will not be physically present for my final (PhD) graduation, but he leaves me with the great legacy of living a life led by 'Otua, ako, and famili.

## Ruth's Talaloto

### God is Real and Eternal

This part of my faith-story speaks to how real God is in this life. Amidst life's trials and tribulations, I have found an insurmountable peace in knowing God; in Him I am safe and secure. In Him my loved ones are safe and secure. As a mother whose beloved son recently passed on to eternity, I recall that, soon after his departure, I was challenged to fully comprehend what the scriptures meant in Psalm 23:4 (English Standard Version Bible, 2001) "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." When our boy was still with us (physically), we used to read this verse together, putting it to memory, quoting it to one another to bolster our faith during faka-famili (family gathering times). But, as the time drew closer, the hard realization that my youngest son was going to be faced with this reality sunk in. Watching his spiritual being grow stronger and the clarity of his faith increase daily, I was comforted in knowing that my son was attuned to God's Holy Spirit, and that God would be with him, all the way. Each of us have this opportunity to call on God, and to live in faith, with a clarity of their eternity; for, eventually, each of us will face this same reality. In all my vulnerability, I have come to realize just how significant God's eternal presence is. My peace and hope are in God for He is my constant in this temporal earth, and unto eternity. God guides me through His word (the Bible). His Holy Spirit comforts and counsels me, and the grace and mercy received through His son—Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the sins of all mankind—gives me an everlasting relationship (vā) with God. So, in other words, death has lost its sting! All these multi-dimensions of the Heavenly Father, I personally connect to, and my son personally connected to; this is the foundation of our Christian faith that keeps us going, through it all. There is unfathomable peace in knowing God; it surpasses anything seemingly too hard in this temporal life as a sojourner.

I often experience God's truths, or light bulb "Aha!" moments in picture form. This may be something I learned, over time, from my father, Faifekau (Pastor) 'Ahoia 'Ilaiū, as he tends to use a lot of imagery in his sermons when unpacking scriptures. This often captured my imagination growing up, listening to the descriptive Tongan, English, Greek and Hebrew languages and narratives that he used, painting images with his words. The sketch in Figure 2 is a tribute to my father, for all the years of storytelling—invested talanoa mālie (storying

with emotive language and illustrations, creating a vibe of exuberance)—that he gifted to us, while we sat in the pews, imagining all of God’s truths in picture form. This simple sketch captures a portion of the scenario, first described by Dad during one of his sermons in the early ‘90s, of how God’s peace is what we feel when safe and secure, while everything else around us is raging like a storm. The point he was making is that life is not problem-free. But through the tempest, God is right there, holding us up and protecting us from the brunt of it. The stormy scene, the coastal surge, and the darkness of night are likened to the challenges in our lifetime. The juxtaposition of the little bird nestled in the crevice of the cliff face, safe and sound, unharmed and unperturbed by the surroundings, represents the life of a Christian person who knows God’s peace. I am reminded that, even now, while the storm is raging, I can be confident because God is with my family—both here, now, and into eternity; through it all, He continues to shelter us, keeping us secure (New International Version Bible, 1987, Deuteronomy 31:6).

## Figure 2

### *Insurmountable Peace in God*



*Note:* Pencil sketch by R.L. Faleolo (29th June 2023).

Thirty years after hearing this story, the imagery remains in my mind, and the essence of the message still resonates strongly within my inner spirit. This sketch also captures my remembrances of my dad, the great storyteller and zealous preacher of God’s truths; I am

affirmed of the strong foundations of my faith being laid, passed down by my father and further passed onto my own children. The layers of rocks in the sketch capture my love for all things geographical. They are, in essence, storylines trapped in the stone of geological formations; natural events—often destructive and extreme. These layers of rock are telling of time and events passed, reflecting the enduring reality of God’s everlasting love and truths: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (New International Version Bible, 1987, Matthew 24:35). He is our safe place, our one true constant in this life; through it all, knowing Him gives us an insurmountable peace.

## **He Made Me for This Time and Place**

Since I personally gave my heart to Him, I know that I am loved, forgiven, and accepted by an Almighty God. I am indebted to Him and serve others in my line of work, because of His love and Kingdom plans in this world.

My PhD journey was God’s idea. I remember telling Him in 2015, “Father, this was Your idea, so please help me do this right.” Each time I was dealing with a challenge along the way, I was assured by my faith in God and in the scriptures: “being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (New King James Version Bible, 1982, Philippians 1:6). In my quiet times with God each morning, things I had been trying to resolve from my readings, writing, or data collection, would at that time unravel and be clarified. From the selection of my advisory team, the honing of my topic for research, the methods and methodology, the God-ordained breaks in between, to the final writing up stages of the thesis—God was there. I had committed to this work as a way of walking out my faith in the academic spaces that were once upon a time a faraway dream.

I remember getting Ds in English as a child. Little did I know that God would use this point of weakness to reveal Himself to me. Although I was born in Aotearoa, I was essentially raised with English as my second language because Tongan was spoken at home. I really needed proper scaffolding to succeed. God had things lined up for me. In 1990, I had an English teacher who gave me the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This text came to life when we watched the old black and white film version, and the value of narratives and visual aids strengthened my learning journey. At this time, because I really wanted to unpack the novel and I had huge vocabulary gaps, I asked my parents for a dictionary; it became my companion for reading anything, including the Bible. This action strengthened my reading skills. It was during the following year, when I was given Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for homework and asked to write a personal response to the text, that I discovered a love for reflexive writing. Having read the King James Version of the Bible with all its “thou,” “hast,” and “thine,” Shakespeare made total sense to me, much to the surprise

of my classmates. My English teacher was so impressed with my written responses that she read them to the class. These small but profound experiences helped me to gain the confidence as a Tongan student living in a tu'a Tonga (diaspora) context.

As time has passed, God has revealed why I must write. Today, I write to promote knowledge and understanding, to empower and edify others and to impact and create positive changes. There is no mistake that God has been preparing me for such a time as this. The more I learn, the more I understand that this learning journey has not been about me, it was about His Kingdom's work that needs to be done through me. I am but a vessel in my Father's hands.

For Inez, it was her thirst for truth that caused her to seek for answers.

## **Inez's Talaloto**

### **Truth is my Sustenance**

My grandparents had built churches across villages in Tonga and Fiji. Their legacy of Christianity was evident in my parents' work as missionaries. They chose to migrate to Australia to live and work amongst an Aboriginal mission in Yirrkala. Despite this spiritual inheritance, I desperately sought after truth in my own way. Growing up, I was expected to attend church, so I would obey my parents, reluctantly, without a complete understanding of God. Church life was one of familiarity, with religious rituals that would keep my family happy, but I felt suffocated and bored. When I turned 18 and I could choose for myself, I rushed to explore other religions, new age options, and whatever else the world could offer. Coupled with this deep dive search for spiritual truth, I spent 21 years in tertiary institutes, growing in knowledge and wisdom that resulted in a Bachelor of Theatre, a conjoint Bachelor of Laws/Bachelor of Business, a Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice—being admitted into the courts as a lawyer— a Graduate Diploma of Education, and, recently, a Doctorate in Education. Eventually, I found the truth I was seeking for. It wasn't in the tertiary institutes, or in man-made religions or rituals, rather it was in a personal relationship with a living God. As a result, I began a journey developing a strong vā with my Creator, as His creation.

Like any relationship, this takes regular, devoted time, with focused effort, and attention. Since I love a good chat, a place of prayer was where I would naturally receive a spiritual awakening. I remember shutting myself in my room as Jesus instructs, “when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (New Century Version Bible, 1987, Matthew 6:6-7). The reward I was seeking was an increased capacity to hear His voice. I

intrepidly whispered my first genuine heartfelt prayer with determination, “Lord I want to hear Your voice, please speak to me.” Being a drama queen, I expected a deep booming voice and the rushing sound of a herd of cattle to rumble through my room. Instead, only a soft whisper was heard, “Here I am.” It was so quiet that I repeated my plea, “Lord, I want to hear Your voice, please speak to me.” The gentle whisper came again “I am here.” The instant I realized God’s presence, a deep sense of peace and assurance came upon me. I was addicted. The journey of spiritual growth, nurturing my spirituality in prayer, has taught me to listen intently so that I can hear the quiet whisper of His voice; a peace comes with His presence, with reading and abiding in His biblical truths, and through worship. These experiences of God remain at the forefront of my spiritual and cultural identity. The promotion of a daily dialogue between Creator and creation is prominent across Pacific communities. I have seen how our peoples express a strong faith in God; their spirituality is central to their personal wellness and collective wellbeing (Fainga’a-Manu Sione et al., 2023; Faleolo, 2020a; 2020b; Ihara & Vakalahi, 2011; Makasiale, 2023). Despite the importance of spirituality, however, this has been a battle to uphold, particularly in dominantly secular spaces, including academia.

One of my first encounters was while attending an event with the network for Australian Pacific Academics. The first speaker stated, “Given we are decolonizing our spaces; we will no longer be praying. Instead, we will read Pacific proverbs.” We were all Pacific academics in the room. So, I questioned that statement, “Why are we now closing the door on prayer as a process of decolonization?” I immediately cringed and felt like my ancestors, the nation of Tonga, and my local church community of 200 Pasifika people with whom I engage deeply, both culturally and spiritually, were all completely nullified in that one statement. Thanks to the wisdom received from God, I decided not to disrupt the gathering; the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and the quiet still voice prompted me to hold my tongue (a miracle in itself). Instead, I waited. Later, I wrote to the facilitators raising the point that what I love most about being Pacific is our spirituality, prayerfulness, and faith in God; these are so deeply ingrained in our cultural identity. These are strongly expressed in Tonga’s national motto “Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi’a” (God and Tonga are my inheritance). Christianity is at the core of our cultural practices, as Tongans in our homelands and in tu’a Tonga contexts. If I were to ever say to others in our community gatherings that we should no longer pray because it is a “white man thing,” I would be deemed a disgrace.

What does it mean to decolonize? My father tells me legends about how the King of Tonga tried and tested the missionaries that had come to Tonga, by throwing them into shark-infested waters. This was to test if they were really missionaries sent by God. Much to the King’s surprise, these missionaries survived the sharks. As a result, the King made an informed decision to denounce the ancient gods and to accept the new God preached by the missionaries. When I heard these stories, I was reminded of the astute nature of our ancestors. Their leadership and decisions led to Tonga’s monarchy remaining strong and the



sole surviving Pacific-run kingdom in Oceania. This position of control was maintained by careful negotiations of alliances with Palangi (European/s) who had come to their shores. These same skilful leaders chose to declare God (Christ) as Tonga's inheritance, so who are we to undo this under the guise of decolonization? As an early career researcher, I have drawn meanings of decolonization from my ancestors, from Tonga and its history, and from the communities within which I am currently grounded, as well as my own personal relationship with Christ; these define what it means to decolonize within the academic space. Decolonization to me is about deciphering and putting aside what is man-made and self-centred, to discover the ways of my Creator— His way of being has always been intended for His creation. The best way to achieve this requires a deeply established vā between the Creator and us, His creation.

Once vā between the Creator and creation has been established, the redefining of who we are and our identity in God can be fully experienced. A Tongan proverb offers Indigenous wisdom on this matter, “Kapau oku te fie'ilo ki he feitu'u oku tonu ke te hu'u kiai, pea te vakai ki he feitu'u na'a te ha'u mei ai.” The English translation of this proverb states, “If you want to know where you are going, you need to find out where you have come from.” Anga faka-Tonga encompasses a lot of Christian principles that have become core to our being and knowing. Let us consider these further.

## Anga Faka-Tonga

As Tongan women, the concept of anga faka-Tonga underpins our responsibility, duty, and care towards our families and communities. Anga faka-Tonga is better known as the “Tongan way” of life; a collocation of Tongan customary practices based on fundamental values crucial to our way of being. Ka'ili (2017) highlights the Tongan values that are fundamental to this Tongan way of life, including tauhi vā—the maintenance and nurturing of sociocultural relational spaces. According to Faleolo (2012) in her study of Tongan women academics in Aotearoa New Zealand, anga faka-Tonga is “the combined output or living out of two concepts; Tongan ethnic identity and Tongan cultural identity” (p. 8). These identities are both subjectively defined, albeit embracing all things deemed Tongan culture. There is a strong acceptance across Tongan collectives of anga faka-Tonga, but it is important to note that there is a continuum of views held about its application in different contexts whereby some traditional aspects of anga faka-Tonga can be seen by some as “burdensome” and limiting of progressive lives within the tu'a Tonga contexts (Faleolo, 2012, p. 9). According to Afeaki (2004) and Taufu (2010), the concept of anga faka-Tonga is a highly contested concept within the tu'a Tonga communities of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand; in particular, there are differing views between the older and younger generations of migrants (Faleolo, 2023b; 2023c). Afeaki (2004) analyzed the sociocultural connections that New Zealand-born Tongans maintained, concluding that Tongan youth remained strongly

connected to their culture through their intergenerational connections (parents, extended family) as well as through participation in cultural and community events. Taufu (2010) notes that, while intergenerational differences existed in tu'a Tonga contexts between the younger and older cohorts, in Australia, they both claim their cultural identity is Tongan. So, regardless of whether we are based in our island homeland, or in tu'a Tonga, our cultural ways and identity as Tongans remains strong (Faleolo, 2020b; 2020c).

As Tongan women, born and raised in tu'a Tonga, we have each maintained our anga faka-Tonga through similar intergenerational connections, as discussed by Afeaki (2004). We proudly claim our cultural identities as Tongans; daily navigating the different worlds and frameworks we live in, across spectrums; from Tongan to Western contexts, from spiritual to secular protocols, private to public spheres. As Christian academics, there is a constant code-switching that occurs, as we tauhi vā with those who “get our drift” and those who do not. The strong vā between the Creator and creation enables us to anchor into the security we have in Him irrespective of the situation. More specific to this article's focus, our connection to God enables us to explore and re-define ourselves, from an eternal perspective (not governed by things that are temporal) in academic spaces, without losing our core spiritual being and cultural foundations, as Tongan Christians. Finding harmony between decolonization and Christianity means that labels which are often used to identify us and our communities such as collectivism versus individualism are re-imagined.

### **Collective-Individual**

A collective-individual is a person who works strategically with a group of like-minded people. They are individuals that go against dominant norms (whether it is Western or Pacific) for the purpose of achieving a greater good for their collective (Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023). This term was developed out of three doctoral candidatures conducted within Pacific communities in Southeast Queensland, Australia. The three Pasifika researchers sought to find an adequate term to describe how Pacific pioneers were driving change within their communities, against the odds (Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023). To talk about Pasifika collectives without recognizing the key roles the individuals within them contribute to the whole, is an incomplete way of perceiving a collective. For instance, Jason Taumalolo, the Tongan international rugby league star, has catapulted the Tongan national team, Mate Ma'a Tonga (MMT) onto the global competitive platform of the Rugby World Cup (Enari & Keung, 2022). Jason's decision to sacrifice lucrative opportunities overseas to play for his island nation's MMT team, has had a ripple effect on other Tongan National Rugby League players. This individual's decision may have looked like a pay cut to outsiders, but the worldwide impact was to uplift his nation's sporting confidence and highlight to the world the prowess and pride of Oceania's sportsmanship and talent (Enari & Keung, 2022).

For Tongan mothers, there is an individual sacrifice and leadership that occurs, within the home. This daily activity sets the rhythm for our families (collective). Research reflects the willingness of Pacific mothers (individuals) sacrificing their own medical needs to provide financially for a wedding, funeral, or extended family (Akbar et al., 2022). This creates a tension between what is best for the collective versus the individual, and which should be prioritized. Fainga'a-Manu Sione's 2022 study revealed that the Pacific participants were often focused on the biblical importance of "loving your neighbour" (New International Version Bible, 1987, Mark 12:31)—something that is scripturally sound, but incomplete if it is the only focus. Pasifika habitually see themselves as only serving others (collective), forgetting the second part of the bible verse, "as you love yourself" (individual). Fainga'a-Manu Sione's (2022) participants felt a sense of guilt and shame if they prioritized self-care (individual). The process of decolonization intentionally redefines the collective label to include the importance of the individual and how they are synonymously intertwined and equally as important. Hence the term "collective-individual" (Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023) will help to govern a biblically sound decolonization process for us as Tongan women, and as Christian academics.

When we reflect on the migration journey of our parents and grandparents (Faleolo, 2023b; 2023c; Standfield et al., 2023), it was often an individual that made the initial move for the betterment of their collective. Despite the collective agency that supported their migration, the initial act of faith to move was usually carried out by individuals who left the comforts of the village to explore foreign territories on behalf of those to follow (Faleolo, 2020c; 2023c). This process of individual action on behalf of the collective, can be seen in the scriptures, "God so loved the world [collective] that He gave His only son [individual]" (New International Version Bible, 1987, John 3:16). This collective-individual approach has been at the epicentre of all that was taught to us Tongans, growing up within the family unit, the church, and our communities. Decolonization means re-defining our collectivity as Pasifika peoples, and, more specific to this article, as Tongans, to ensure that we acknowledge both the collective and individual works simultaneously (Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023). When like-minded individuals create spaces for the greater good, we work together to further advance benefits for all, the collective.

### **Competition vs Creating Space for Others**

Baice et al. (2021) highlight the cultures within universities that "continue to drive neoliberal ideals that over-emphasize competition. . ." (p. 75), while Naepi et al. (2019) define the academic pipeline as being fraught with neoliberal expectations where individuals must be self-focused and competitive to succeed; however, the collective-individual approach counteracts this ideology. Instead, collective-individuals are driven by a greater vision for the collective (Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al., 2023). This means, for example, that

we are not afraid to create space for others (collective), as opposed to subscribing to the neo-liberal ideologies of competition and self-centeredness (Fa'avae et al., 2022b). For us, this means that to be a Christian is to belong to both the Kingdom of God, and of Tonga, which are both founded upon 'ofa (love) for God, first and foremost, which overflows onto others. Baice et al. (2021) echoes this desire for unity, as opposed to competition in tertiary institutes, by prioritizing love, respect and kindness when working with others. This entails an active search for opportunities to share, advancing others, defending others, and prioritizing family; all these actions enable good relationships, vā lelei.

We acknowledge that the academic spaces we each walk through, work in, and expend a lot of our thinking time in, can be taxing, not only on our mind and body, but on our soul. The politics that arise in these spaces, between individuals or groups of people are, therefore, the most arduous to deal with; it is in these interactions that we are likely to harm others and ourselves socially, emotionally, and spiritually as academics. We are encouraged in these spaces of conflict, by God's truths "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (New International Version Bible, 1987, Psalm 119:105). We are prompted by God's Holy Spirit to lead conversations towards a way of resolving differences, to bring laughter into a situation that has become awkwardly serious, or to be the first to say "sorry" although we may have had no fault in the situation arising. Each of the authors unpacked their lived experiences of how they navigated academic spaces in circumstances where they had to make a conscious decision to not compete for space, but to create space, for the advancement of God's Kingdom work. The objective is to make God and His love and truths known, so that many shall come to know Him personally and experience His eternal love. This is the greatest motivation of creating space for others as opposed to competition. We embrace the essence of scriptures –that recall the words of Jesus to His disciples, "I assure and most solemnly say to you, anyone who believes in Me will also do the things that I do, and he will do even greater things than these. . ." (New International Version Bible, 1987, John 14:12). As Christians in academia, we too hold this mantra that others will also do as we have done but do even greater things than us; this inspires us to create spaces for others, in God's Kingdom work.

### **Vā Created in Vao: Practice and Purpose as Christian Academics**

There is an understanding of vā (relational spaces) that comes from knowing God, and especially His heart for others. When we apply God's Kingdom economy principles within academia—not where only a few succeed, while others lose— there is an overflow of blessings, freely pouring out (uncontainable) from one person to the next. It is our belief that, when others win, we all win. As Christian women, we celebrate the success of our sisters and brothers knowing the source of their blessings, from whom it flows, and how, in this

“Kingdom vā” we are all connected back to God, through Christ. For it is God who gives these spaces of opportunity. Where He ordains His blessings, also when and to whom they flow, all are in alignment with the rhythms of His Kingdom work. We are privileged to play our part in these spaces (vā), in the time we are given (tā); this is only seasonal and temporal, yet holds eternal meaning and purpose in the larger scheme of things. So, when we see vao (uncleared spaces that are vaoa/overgrown bushlands) in the academic spaces—a place that is often full of misgivings and misunderstandings, chaotic dialogue and deficit theorizing, confused rhetoric, and unfounded truths—we (re)envision and (re)imagine new clearings, new dynamics, cleared spaces, creative opportunities to extend God’s vision and innovation of creation, through our academic practice and living out of decolonization as a Christian.

The sketch (Figure 3) of vao, although a simplistic portrayal, holds truths and meanings that were captured in the talatalanoa (e-talanoa via Zoom, 24th June 2023) with fellow authors and Christian academics, about the spaces that have been created by God, through others. What is unseen or hidden from this perspective of the vao are the collective-individuals that are in the thick of the bush, clearing out the land and making room for others to access this space (vā). As Christians, when we look closely at our academic vao full of opportunities, we will see that someone has been put in place, as a collective-individual, to enact their faith-story in academia. Simultaneously, our movements and enacted faith in these academic circles, intersecting connection points, draws us into spaces where we get rounded out, where rough surfaces are smoothed, where blunt edges become sharpened, and then released into further spaces to be salt and light to the world. Note: Pencil sketch by

### Figure 3

*Vao - a space to be cleared for others*



Note: Faleolo (29th June 2023).

Faleolo recalled how others had helped her in various seasons of her academic learning journey (Faleolo 2023a; Faleolo et al., 2024a; 2024b), and that she could see God's hand at work through those individuals. Faleolo described this God-ordained phenomenon during her PhD and postdoctoral years as likened to a person that was walking through vao (like we often see in our family plots of land, back in Tonga), with a hele pelu (machete) in hand, clearing out spaces for others to walk into, to walk through, or even to occupy. This person who is clearing does not stop their action when one space is cleared, they continue to do so, by leaving that initial clearance for others to use, creating more spaces (Faleolo et al., 2024b). Eventually, others in the clearings see what has been done and reciprocate this act of kindness, for others arriving on scene. The significance of the vao within this sketch is that it is not always evident who has gone before us, to make clearings—trail blazers who had to make a way forward, laying out opportunities and ensuring we had a place to stand when we first arrived in the clearing. We are the ones that often receive accolades because we are able to be seen and have a better sight of what is around us, thanks to the person who had enacted the kindness of clearing the once existing vao, because God had put them in that place, ahead of us. There is a greater purpose in all of this—His Kingdom's purpose: “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...” (New International Version Bible, 1987, Hebrews 12:1).

### **A Powerful Partnership: Village Connect Limited**

Village Connect Limited is the first of its kind in Australia—and possibly the world—to have a maternity clinic co-located within a Pasifika church. The Village Connect maternity clinic, accessible in this central Logan City space, was birthed out of recurring deaths within a failing public hospital system. The partnership of this church with medical practitioners to provide a healing and nurturing service for Pasifika, champions the concepts promoted in this article. Author and Associate Pastor Doctor Inez Fainga'a-Manu Sione explained that “out of tragedy (the death of our babies), our Creator gave birth to hope. That's the power of holding vā with the Creator.” Through the special vā that God has with collective-individuals—like the Senior Pastors, Faamanuia & Ruta Aloalii, Pastor Naomi Pelitte, and others who serve alongside them in this Pasifika community space—many have been blessed. The following two video links will help to illustrate these important understandings of vā with our Creator, leading to purposeful collective-individuals further creating significant vā with and for others.

Village Connect (short story/promo) produced by Sam Sapolu, posted by SAM CITYZ  
<https://youtu.be/32ybAS2fFsA?si=gqj6N9IFgAgE23Ik>

Village Corp Film produced by Sam Sapolu, posted by Village Connect  
<https://youtu.be/AWpcoiftMuA?feature=shared>

## **Closing Thoughts: The Implications of Decolonization and Christianity in Academia**

In the early to mid-1800s, King George Tupou I had declared ‘Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi’a’ when he committed Tonga (the land and people) to the living and true God (Lātūkefu, 1975). This statement tied the Church to the State and was later enshrined in 1875 with the first Tongan constitution (Lātūkefu, 1975). Tonga has since remained free of direct colonial rule, retaining its constitution for 148 years while maintaining a stable, peaceful, yet conservative society (Lātūkefu, 1993). Such a staunch history of Christian foundations helped to stabilize generations of Tongans both in Tonga, and within the tu’a Tonga. As we have explicitly stated through our talaloto (personal testimonies), imagery, poetry, and excerpts of talatalanoa presented here, our indigeneity manifests the generational inheritance of ‘Otua mo Tonga (God and Tonga). The argument that Christianity is a Palangi man’s truth has been debunked in this article. In fact, being Tongan is synonymous with being Christian.

The five themes discussed—vā with the Creator and creation, anga faka-Tonga, collective-individuals, competition versus creating space for others, and vā in vao—reflect how we, as Christian Tongans, have navigated academia. We are inspired and purposed to build the Kingdom of God and Tonga, moving away from a typical academic modus operandi of self-centered, competitive, and neo-liberal agendas. At the genesis of time, God’s instructions after making humanity in His image and in His likeness, was to “be fruitful” (New International Version Bible, 1987, Genesis 1:28). This fruitfulness causes us to boldly move into spaces that are unfamiliar, like the waters that our ancestors once fearlessly traversed, yet our courage and confidence comes from the vā that we hold with our Creator. We hope that the implications of this work will support our brothers and sisters globally, as they take a hold of their spiritual and cultural inheritance and find harmony in the process of decolonization, upholding Christianity in its purest form, within their God given spaces.

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The decolonization that occurs through us, in due time, will be the further preparation and clearing of spaces required for those who follow. You, our Christian academics, will, in turn, pay it forward to others in this Kingdom work. We thank you, in advance, for taking courage to make a difference when your time comes.

This article is a contribution towards the objectives of a larger, ongoing project, “Living Decoloniality as Practicing Christian Academics,” that engages Tongan Christian academics across multiple sites. We are grateful to those on our team, including Associate Professor David Taufui Mikato Fa’avae and Doctor Gemma Malungahu, who have allowed us to present gleanings from our ongoing talatalanoa, e-talanoa, and shared brain dumps.



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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Vā is a Tongan term that refers to the various relational space/s (spiritual, social, cultural, emotional, physical, etc.) between humans, non-human objects (including places) and God.
- <sup>2</sup> Faleolo (2020a) refers to brain dumps in reflexive methodology. It is a term introduced to her, in the context of Pasifika educational writing, by educator and academic Nadeen Papali'i (refer to Faleolo, 2020a, p. 64).
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the term, refer to section titled "Collective-Individuals".
- <sup>4</sup> Inspired by Psalm 119:64-78 (New Century Version Bible, 1987).
- <sup>5</sup> See acknowledgement section for other Tongan academics involved in the "Living Decoloniality as Practicing Christians" project.
- <sup>6</sup> "Milk and honey"—a phrase drawn from the Biblical reference in Exodus 3:8 (New International Version Bible, 1987). This is a concept that many Tongan migrant families refer to in their search for betterment, when migrating from Tonga to diaspora contexts like Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. See also Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai (2012) and Faleolo (2020).
- <sup>7</sup> A declaration by King George Tupou I, in early to mid-1800s (Lātūkefu, 1975).
- <sup>8</sup> The terms "salt" and "light" are drawn from biblical verses in Matthew 5:13-16 (all versions).
- <sup>9</sup> Video links used with permission, and naming of individuals granted via personal communication (2 October 2023) between author and Pastor Inez Fainga'a-Manu Sione and creative collective-individual Sam Sapolu, contactable at: [samzcityz@gmail.com](mailto:samzcityz@gmail.com)
- <sup>10</sup> "God and Tonga are my inheritance," see Endnote 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Tongans worldwide identify themselves as Christian. Tonga has been described as a "strongly Christian nation" since the 19th century (McGrath, 2004, p. 981).