

Managing Religious & Cultural Diversity in the Pacific

Law & Religion Conference: Apia, Samoa; 30 April & 1 May 2012



Opening address by
His Highness Tui
Atua Tupua
Tamasese Ta'isi Efi

*Samoan Head of
State and Chancellor
of National
University of Samoa*

Theme: *How best to manage religious diversity so as to create an environment that fosters harmonious relationships between different religious and cultural groups, lessens religious and cultural tensions, and recognizes the human right to religion, and religious freedom, within national, local and traditional contexts.*

Date: Monday 30 April & Tuesday 1 May 2012 (9am-4pm)

Venue: National University of Samoa

Sponsors:

- National University of Samoa
- Victoria University (Wellington, New Zealand)
- International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University (Utah, U.S.A)
- UNESCO

Contact Professor Paul Morris, UNESCO Chair in Inter-religious Understanding and Relations in New Zealand and the Pacific, for more information (paul.morris@vuw.ac.nz)

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Summary: All societies are culturally and religiously diverse. This diversity, ever more evident due to a variety of factors, including the global movement of ideas, people and institutions, increasingly requires managing by all those involved – states and religious communities. Religious diversity, poorly managed, leads to differences becoming divisive and even to open conflict and violence. Religious diversity well managed, on the other hand, gives rise to dialogue and understanding, with the result that communities are strengthened and diversity can become acknowledged as an asset rather than a liability. The recognition of the religious rights of majority and minority communities – of all citizens – creates peace and stability within and across communities.

This symposium will explore different models of religious diversity in different polities with a view to their application to Pacific contexts. While the fundamental right to practice ones religion is nearly universal, in practice there are tensions between individual and collective rights, between different religious groups, and between states and particular religious groups. What are the best ways to manage religious diversity? What are the rights to religion? Are there legal and cultural limits to these rights? Is more extensive legislation the answer? Can religious harmony be legislated for?

Symposium speakers and panelists, including academics, theologians, church and religious leaders, policy advisors and lawmakers, will bring their wisdom and experience to bear on the best management of religious diversity in the Pacific, including: how to foster dialogue between different churches and faith groups; how to respond and resolve local tensions and conflicts in ways that recognize and respect custom and tradition alongside individual and collective rights enshrined in national and international law.

Objectives: The principal purpose of the symposium is to look forward to ways that will ensure that robust relationships are established that will promote religious freedom and tolerance and mutual respect for different churches and faiths, including, a sensitivity to and respect for, local practices. Associated objectives include:

1. The recognition of the importance of religion in promoting social cohesion – while the full expression of religious freedom may result in division in communities, the symposium will highlight those politico-religious institutions and values that promote social cohesion.
2. Models of religious diversity management that have failed to unify communities and led to increased tension and conflict will be specifically examined for the lessons that can be learned.
3. The symposium will create opportunities for better communication between religious communities and political leaders of the countries in which they are located.
4. Religious leaders, although espousing differing theologies, will gain benefit by close dialogue on issues they all face.

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Description of Event: The event will be held at NUS. It will be conducted as a two day seminar. Keynote speakers will address themes for 15-20 minutes and will then allow for a further 15-20 minutes discussion of their assigned topic. Break-out discussion groups will be conducted to address specific issues. A final plenary session will be held where findings of break-out sessions are presented and the closing speeches presented.

Conference Topics:

- **Freedom of religion and fundamental principles of democracy:** What is religious freedom? What are the fundamental human rights that church and state both need to protect? Is the principle of separation of church and state something to be valued and pursued?
- **The relationship between government and religion:** This section will explore the limits of government intrusion into the religious sphere and religion's intrusion into the government sphere. It will determine the areas of overlap, as well as those areas where one sector has no role in dictating the programs and processes of the other.
- **Threats and challenges to religious tolerance:** What is fundamentalism and how does it impact detrimentally on both government and religion? How do democratic societies incorporate religious principles without disenfranchising those of the electorate not of the dominant faith?
- **The lessons of history with respect to religious tolerance:** Many military conflicts often had a religious basis or foundation. What must societies do to foster peace through the encouragement of policies of religious tolerance?
- **Ethnicity and religion:** In many countries ethnicity and religion are inextricably tied together. What, then, are the values of ethnic tolerance which must be promoted to protect religious freedom but also foster racial harmony and economic prosperity
- **Culture and religion:** The dominant culture of a country may be tied to a particular faith. To what extent should culture and religion be intertwined? Are there risks for religious freedom when cultural considerations dominate religious expression? Should faiths be required to adhere to certain cultural expressions to receive the favour of the communities in which they operate?

Enquiries:

Professor Paul Morris

UNESCO Chair in Inter-religious Understanding and Relations in New Zealand and the Pacific

School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies

Victoria University

paul.morris@vuw.ac.nz

+64 (0)4 4635037