LEARNING FROM *IFOGA*

Tanya Lameta, Christa L. McKirland, and Phil Halstead
Carey Baptist College

INTRODUCTION

Nelson Mandela famously stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."[1] Desmond Tutu astutely warned that there is no future without forgiveness.[2] In this paper, we—Tanya Lameta, Christa McKirland, and Phil Halstead—seek to show the power of embodied educational practices for how we understand forgiveness. As a Samoan woman, Tanya Lameta has gifted Samoan knowledge to two Pālāgi (non-Samoans) and we will each share of our learning from *Ifoga* from our different vantage points. *Ifoga* is the traditional Samoan communal practice of apologising and seeking forgiveness after particularly damaging interpersonal offences have transpired.[3] We do this first by learning about the practice of *Ifoga* from Tanya Lameta, then we explore some of the ways that *Ifoga* might shed light on atonement theories, and we conclude by sharing the practice of *Ifoga* through *Ifoga*-inspired pastoral reflections.

IFOGA

As a Samoan woman living in New Zealand, I (Tanya) have found myself all along a continuum for how I hold theology in one hand and my Samoan culture in the other. There have been certain life issues where the two marry well when applied and practised. Other times, the two are not compatible which can be confusing and equally frustrating, especially when facing colonised systems and practices. One such area that is significant in the Samoan worldview, is also significant to the Christian faith—forgiveness. To best understand a Samoan understanding of forgiveness, I will explain the process of *Ifoga.*

Before the missionaries arrived in 1830, Samoa was governed by the *faipule o nu'u* (village council) comprised of *Matai* (Chiefs).[4] There was no supreme court in place during this time; instead, each *nu'u* (village) would have the respective *Matai* to resolve violations and conflicts between families, villages, churches or districts. Instead of Western legal processes, Samoan people would use the ritual ceremonial

[1] "Top Nine Nelson Mandela Quotes about Education," The Borgen Project, https://borgenproject.org/nelson-mandela-quotes-about-education/. For a persuasive case on the formative goal of all education, and theological education particularly, see: Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).
[2] Desmond Tutu dedicated a book to this theme. See: Desmond Tutu, *There is No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
[3] Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson, "The Ifoga: The Exchange Value of Social Honour in Samoa," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 114.2 (2005): 109.
[4] Macpherson and Macpherson, "The Ifoga,", 110.

act of *Ifoga*.[5] *Ifoga* is the traditional Samoan practice of seeking forgiveness and rendering a formal apology as a result of a hostile event. The word *Ifoga* is derived from the root word *ifo*, which translates to bow down, restrain, give in, and make a formal apology.[6] It involves ʻāiga (family), immediate and extended, and sometimes the village of the offender. They will gather to perform the public reconciliatory act to the ʻāiga of the victim. The *Ifoga* is an apology that demonstrates public humiliation by begging for forgiveness in such a way that the recipients (victim's family) are made to feel that justice has been done.[7]

Samoan culture is built on honour and shame, and in the *Ifoga*, it requires a representative to bow as the scapegoat.[8] Only the highest *Matai* (Chief) of the ʻāiga/nu'u or another person of equal stature, such as a Reverend Minister, is seen worthy enough to be the taulaga (scapegoat) or pulou (one kneeling down and covered by the ʻie toga (fine mats)).[9] Gilson writes, "bowing down is the greatest loss of face which a Samoan could suffer voluntarily."[10] Lavata'i agrees and goes on to say, "that the abasement act is stripping away of status, dignity and crown to be lowered down facing the ground as if an animal."[11]

In the eyes of Samoans, it is shameful to see a village having to surrender their high chief to being treated like an animal for wrong actions they did not commit, but the Matai's role calls for responsibility. This is the meaning of a Samoan proverb, *"O le sala o le mea a le Matai"* (atonement is the sole responsibility of the high chief).[12]

The ʻie toga (fine mats) are the most valued possession and the most significant object in the Samoan custom.[13] The 'ie toga is used in *Ifoga* as a symbol of humility to cover the Chief who is bowing. At this time, the offended party has the opportunity to inflict pain upon the bowing, covered Chief. When those receiving the *Ifoga* have forgiven the guilty party, they accept the ʻie toga as a sign of the atonement and forgiveness by removing the ʻie toga and pardoning the life of the Chief bowing.[14]

In terms of timing, it is imperative for the offending party to perform *Ifoga* as quickly as possible, because in the case of a murder incident, it was culturally permitted for the victim party to respond in retribution for the sake of their lost.[15] In 1856, in the village of Sala'ilua, Savai'i, a European trader named William Fox was shot and killed after accusing a man from the village of Sagone, Savai'i of theft.[16] Representatives from Sagone made an *Ifoga* to the village of Sala'ilua but was refused and then reciprocated

---

[5] L. Filoiali'i and L. Knowles, "The Ifoga: The Samoan Practice of Seeking Forgiveness for Criminal Behaviour," *Oceania* 53.4 (1983): 384.
[6] R. W. Allardice, *A Simplified Dictionary of Modern Samoa* (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1987), 27.
[7] Leilani Tuala-Warren, "A Study into the Ifoga: Samoa's Answer to Dispute Healing," *Te Mātahauariki Institute Occasional Paper Series* 4 (2002): 18.
[8] Sanele Faasua Lavata'i, *The Ifoga Ritual in Samoa in Anthropological and in Biblical Perspectives* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2018), 121.
[9] Tuala-Warren, "A Study into the Ifoga," 19.
[10] R. P. Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900: The Politics of a Multi-cultural Community* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1970), 49.
[11] Lavata'i, *The Ifoga Ritual in Samoa*, 122.
[12] Lavata'i, *The Ifoga Ritual in Samoa*, 122.
[13] G. B. Milner, *Ifoga* (Auckland: Pasifika Press, 1966), 82.
[14] Filoiali'i and Knowles, "The Ifoga," 386.
[15] T. A. T. T. T. Efi, "In Search of Meaning, Nuance and Metaphor in Social Policy," *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 20 (2003): 60.
[16] Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, 213.

by killing a *Matai* of Sagone instead.[17] Over the past 30 years, there are minimal (if any) reports of retaliation in *Ifoga,* however, there have been incidents where the offending party has been made to wait a day or more, seated outside in the sun.[18]

Many cases of *Ifoga* have been conducted outside of Samoa, but are still practiced by Samoans. Thus, the significance of the *Ifoga* is not lost as a custom for Samoans, as the same purpose and meaning behind the apology remains today.[19] For our purposes, we believe there is space for the *values* of this traditional practice to be integrated into New Zealand's twenty-first century culture even if the practice itself is not *Ifoga*. For instance, the values of *Ifoga* are to bring ownership of shame to the offender's actions, responsibility and accountability by the family and village of supporters, and restoration, healing, and forgiveness for the family of the victim.[20] It is a concept that can be used beyond the court of law system, such as in community conference groups, churches, schools, and even the Government.[21]

Pacific journalist, Mariner Fagaiava-Muller, writes

> On Sunday, August 1, thousands congregated into Auckland City's town hall in silence for the moment Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern would apologize for a racist immigration policy that tore apart a proud people and left many traumatized for life. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her government leaders chose the Samoan traditional practice of *Ifoga* to express their sorrow, remorse, and regret toward the Pasifika community. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern offered on behalf of the Government a formal and unreserved apology to Pacific communities for the discriminatory implementation of immigration laws that led to the Dawn Raids.[22]

Judge A'e'au Semi Epati offers another perspective,

> Case in point is the 1994 case at Otahuhu when a young Samoan boy ran over and killed two young Tongan children. When the offender was identified his 'āiga requested the assistance of the Samoan boxer David Tua and a local Tongan Methodist priest to lead the *Ifoga* on their behalf. They are respected public figures in the community and would add weight to the apology. [23]

David Tua is also from the same village as the Samoan family the apology was accepted immediately, and the matter was settled.[24] The parents of the two Tongan boys embraced the offender with open arms, which was a gesture of accepting the offender's apology. *Fa'aleleiga (*reconciliation) was, therefore, achieved when peace and harmony were restored between the two communities through the *Ifoga* process.

When the 'ie toga is removed, the *Ifoga* ritual moves into the second phase. The *Ifoga* party is welcomed into the house to share a meal and fellowship, this means the victim's family have accepted the

---

[17] Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoan: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1987), 32.
[18] Efi, "In Search of Meaning, Nuance and Metaphor in Social Policy," 61.
[19] Marie Ropeti, "A Pacific Perspective on Restorative Justice: The Power of Saying Sorry," in *A Restorative Approach to Family Violence: Changing Tack*, ed. Anne Hayden et al. (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 135.
[20] Efi, "In Search of Meaning, Nuance and Metaphor in Social Policy," 62.
[21] Ropeti, "A Pacific Perspective on Restorative Justice: The Power of Saying Sorry," 138.
[22] Mariner Fagaiava-Muller, "Dark Days of the 1970s Dawn Raids are at Last Formally Acknowledged," *Radio New Zealand*, https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/448372/dark-days-of-the-1970s-dawn-raids-are-at-last-formally-acknowledged.
[23] A. S. Epati, "Samoan Notions of Cultural and Social Justice: Conflicts with Western Law Systems," in *Justice in the Community*, vol. 1 of *Re-Thinking Criminal Justice*, ed. F. W. M. McElrea (Auckland: Legal Research Foundation, 1995), 51.
[24] P. U. T. Lauta-Mulitalo, "The Role of Fa'asamoa in Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand" (Massey University, Master in Social work, 1998), 49.

fa'amaualaloga (apology). The chiefs do most of the talking, using eloquent words to uplift and elevate the family and their acceptance of the apology. The *Ifoga* party come prepared to exchange gifts to honour the family for extending grace, peace, and harmony in return.[25]

ATONEMENT THEORY

I (Christa) remember where I was sitting in chapel when Tanya unpacked the process of *Ifoga*. I was stunned by both the beauty and depth of this communal practice. Coincidentally, outside of chapel I was also in the thick of reading Willie Jennings' work *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* and being challenged by my own homogenous and imperialistic Christian imaginaries. In Tanya's teaching, I was confronted with an embodied theology of forgiveness that was corporate, restorative, and ongoing. Her portrayal of *Ifoga* stretched my imagination and deepened my understanding of God and forgiveness. Since that experience, I have continued to reflect on *Ifoga* through working on this paper with Tanya and Phil, and as I have taught lectures on the atoning work of Christ. I have become even more convinced that we need embodied pedagogies like *Ifoga* to stretch and challenge our oftentimes flattened understandings of atonement. Seeing atonement through an *Ifoga* lens can help enrich our understanding of what forgiveness looks like in real life and even model helpful correctives to some existing theories of atonement.

Bringing in *Ifoga* can help us make sense of the atoning work of Jesus. Of course, describing what Jesus has done is a tall order, but it is also a rich and rewarding order that can invite us to stretch our culturally-conditioned horizons. This stretching can expand our view of God and also our understanding of ourselves and the world around us—especially when other cultures have different ways of conceiving and enacting forgiveness. As a picture and a process of relational restoration, *Ifoga* can speak into aspects of salvation by also addressing specific dilemmas brought about by human sinfulness. "One responsibility of the doctrine of atonement," Adam Johnson explains, "is to honor the nature of this manifold dilemma, bringing such diverse issues as guilt, shame, demonic oppression, environmental crises, and systemic poverty under the scope of its inquiry. The work of Christ, after all, reconciles *all things*, all sin, all things currently opposing the will and purpose of God."[26] The manifold nature of salvation and the manifold nature of the effects of human sinfulness thus cry out for multiple ways of talking about the atoning work of Jesus of Nazareth, the God-human. And yet, we would be wise to recognise the limits of any "theory of atonement" that is totalising or claims to be the only way of conceiving of Jesus' life and work of atonement. In fact, only in the last couple hundred years have people leaned towards one theory or another. Before then, "[m]ultiple explanations were a matter of course, given the complexity of the problem(s) to be overcome—more a matter of 'let me count the ways' than boiling things down to one primary view."[27]

---

[25] Lavata'i, *The Ifoga Ritual in Samoa*, 125.
[26] Adam J. Johnson, "Atonement: The Shape and State of the Doctrine," in *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 1-17, 8.
[27] So, what happened? "As part of the Enlightenment's influence, however, particularly in attempts to summarize and classify the history of doctrine, theories often came to be seen as unique and mutually exclusive" Johnson,

Thus, the goal of what follows is not to force *Ifoga* to fit into a certain theory of atonement, but to ask how it already speaks to both the dilemmas brought about by human sinfulness and the solutions to those dilemmas which involve forgiveness.

Fortunately, throughout Christian history, different thinkers in different times and places have taken biblical categories for talking of Jesus' atoning work and applied them in their own contexts. For instance, in Anselm's day, he focused on the cross and the payment of ransom by Jesus, the God-man, on our behalf. In a feudal system, wherein rank and honour were hierarchically stratified, requiring a payment of infinite value (the life of the God-man) was the only way to satisfy the payment of dishonouring an infinitely great being. When this payment was satisfied, God's forgiveness could be given.

Later, Calvin, went a step further to argue for the requirement of punishment in order for God to forgive sins. He, too, was conditioned by his context in which "sacrificial pictures no longer communicated meaningfully, and penal metaphors were available and helpful."[28] Calvin, himself a lawyer, made sense of the cross through courtroom imagery.

While we can debate the merits of these views, our point is more to stress the importance and precedent of translating the atoning work of Jesus into different cultural contexts. The "control" on this work of translation is twofold (and, we propose, in this order): 1) the categories from Scripture that speak to Jesus' life and works; 2) the experience of resonance for that cultural community upon receiving that atonement theory in their context.[29] With these controls in mind, we return to the rich imaginary that the Samoan practice of *Ifoga* might contribute to understanding Christ's atoning work.

Based on Tanya's description above, *Ifoga* sheds light on satisfaction, substitutionary, and participation aspects of atonement. Returning to Anselm's satisfaction account, the status of the one paying the ransom is significant for the efficaciousness of the forgiveness. In the case of the chief or highly respected member of the village being the one under the 'ie toga (mat), we see a resonance with this theory. Add to this the extreme humiliation of bowing down and sitting under the 'ie toga, and we are reminded of Philippians 2, and participation accounts of atonement which see the solidarity of the chief with the offender. The Son comes in human form, which was already humbling enough, but then he is humiliated in his form of death, "even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:8). Even though the chief does not share in the wrong-doing, the chief shares in being a member of that village community and representing the offender in the ritual. Relatedly, the fact that the chief represents the offending party in their place is highly significant. In

---

"Atonement," 9. For another excellent resource on thinking through the manifold ways to understand Christ's atoning work, including the importance of narrative, see: Jonathan C. Rutledge, "Narrative and Atonement: The Ministry of Reconciliation in the Work of James H. Cone," *Religions* (forthcoming).

[28] Stephen R. Holmes, "Can Punishment bring Peace? Penal Substitution Revisited," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58.1 (2005): 104-123, 109.

[29] Regarding the Scriptural categories criterion, "we find in Paul's letters a virtual cornucopia of atonement images. For example, reconciliation may stand at the center of the apostle's presentation of the effects of Jesus's death in 2 Corinthians 5:14– 6:2, but other motifs are mentioned too: substitution ("for us," 5:14, 15), representation or interchange (5:14, 21), sacrifice (5:21), justification (implicitly, 5:19, 21), forgiveness (5:19), and new creation (5:16–17). Moreover, the cross and resurrection of Christ appear together as salvific events (5:15)." Joel B. Green, "Theologies of the Atonement in the New Testament" in *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 115-134, 129.

substitutionary accounts of atonement, especially pulling from the Levitical language around the sacrifice of animals on behalf of the sinner, and later, of Jesus as the dual sacrifice of the Passover lamb and Yom Kippur scapegoat, the substitutionary aspect of *Ifoga* is poignant.[30] The lamb, the goat, and Jesus, were all innocent of wrong-doing and yet, stand in for the offending party taking on the offences of the guilty party.

While providing a picture of this mixture of theories is profound in itself, *Ifoga* can bring something of a correction to discussions of penal atonement theories. This is evident through the *optional* nature of punishment that the offended party can inflict on the representative of the offending party. Forgiveness of the wrong-doing is not contingent on the punishment of the chief under the 'ie toga. The very action of humbling oneself, representing the offender, sitting under the mat, and being willing to endure punishment is sufficient to warrant forgiveness. The chief's volitional solidarity with the offender is thus all that is necessary to move the offended party to forgiveness. And yet, even if the offended party does retaliate on the taulaga/pulou, the goal of the entire ritual is the reconciliation of the offended and offender. The point of the process is restoration.

The richness of this imaginary does not stop here, however, as the taulaga/pulou is uncovered and forgiveness is given, the offended and offender then share a meal together as the offending party then exchanges gifts with those offended thereby establishing harmony going forward.[31] The second part of *Ifoga* thus communicates the ongoing nature of the relationship, something that some atonement theories can miss if they only focus on the cross.[32] The current corrective in atonement theories to grapple with the ongoing significance of Jesus's resurrection and ascension could be helpfully complemented by considering this powerful ritual.

Returning again to Johnson's point about our manifold dilemma and a manifold understanding of salvation, the *Ifoga* ritual speaks especially to human sinfulness and its effects on community. Such an understanding of forgiveness is resistant to an over-interiorised faith as the offence is made public and the dealing with the offence is also public. Lament, repentance, humility, harmony, and reconciliation would be done communally and as such, helpfully challenges more individualistic understandings of salvation. While more would be needed to engage other aspects of what the saving work of Jesus does, such as addressing demonic oppression, environmental crises, and systemic poverty, *Ifoga* seems uniquely suited to help picture a blend of atonement theories. This ritual enriches our understanding of some aspects of the atonement by shedding new light from a Samoan cultural perspective. *Ifoga* does this by embodying aspects of these theories that address both shame and guilt while also centring community, relationship, and the ongoing nature of living harmoniously together—expanding our horizons for how to envision the atoning work of Christ.

---

[30] Jonathan C. Rutledge, *Forgiveness and Atonement: Christ's Restorative Sacrifice* (London: Routledge, 2022), 187-88.
[31] While this ritual could be pressed too far, the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit and believer's giving of their lives in humble sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2) could be seen as an exchange of gifts, however asymmetric the value of the gift.
[32] See: Paul D. Molnar, "Resurrection and Atonement in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance," in *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 57-76; David M. Moffitt, "It Is Not Finished: Jesus's Perpetual Atoning Work as the Heavenly High Priest in Hebrews," in *So Great a Salvation*, eds. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie and Cynthia Long Westfall (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 157-175.

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

I (Phil) also remember where I was sitting in chapel when Tanya unpacked the process of *Ifoga*. As I listened, I was struck that here was an established practice that addresses forgiveness through the communal aspects of *Ifoga*. This was new to me. I was transfixed.

The tidiness of our discussion on *Ifoga* is in no way meant to belie the messiness, pain, challenges, and abject horror of many interpersonal offences. After all, who but the individuals, families, and communities directly embroiled in the dawn raids of the 1970s, and the death of the two Tongan boys in Otahuhu in 1994, can truly know the depth of hurt and devastation that these events set in motion? Clouding the waters further is the fact that large numbers of people who have been deeply injured by others find it a nearly impossible challenge to forgive. How can they contemplate forgiveness when their wounds are raw and their emotional resources are depleted? What are they to do if those who injured them refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoings? What processes can they use to forgive effectively? And what happens after forgiveness?

Ifoga is a uniquely instructive practice that not only sheds light on pivotal forgiveness dilemmas, but also provides an accessible roadmap for the path of forgiveness and beyond. In this way, *Ifoga* encompasses theory and practice, and brings hope to a world that desperately needs to discover fresh ways to prevent and process interpersonal wounds.

One of the gifts of *Ifoga* is that it acts as a deterrent to wrongdoing in locations where the practice is known and the notion of *we* eclipses the concept of *me*. Like the proverbial fence at the top of the cliff, *Ifoga* reminds would-be perpetrators of malevolence that the ramifications of offences are extensive. The leaders of the offenders will need to humble themselves, bow as scapegoats, lose face, and risk experiencing pain and shame on account of the wrongdoers. Family and group members will experience shame, and expenses will be incurred. The stakes can be raised further if folks were to reflect on the biblical insight that interpersonal offences also wound God.[33] Knowledge of *Ifoga* with all its symbolic richness likely stops some community-minded and God-fearing people from injuring others and thereby setting this sobering chain of events into motion.

Ifoga is and always has been a communal practice. It does not take place behind closed doors but brings the practice of forgiveness into the open and recognises that, together we are stronger. When serious offences occur, neither the offenders nor the victims are left to do the work of forgiveness alone. Rather, the burden is shared, and victims and offenders are supported, loved, and accompanied. This solidarity increases the efficacy of forgiveness and the restoration of relationships. Parker J. Palmer makes a similar claim: "Community means more than the comfort of souls. It means, and has always meant, the survival of the species."[34]

---

[33] For example, see: Num. 5:6; Psa. 51:4; Acts 22:8; 1 Cor. 8:12.
[34] Parker J. Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 77.

Another benefit of *Ifoga* is that it provides a clear *process* to follow towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and wellbeing in the wake of hostility. Many people understandably slip into a state of shock after they have been wounded. When we are in shock, we are unable to locate, let alone craft, a route to healing; however, engaging with familiar models to recovery is possible.

Let us now consider the individual steps of the *Ifoga* process. By going to the wounded person's family (with others), the offender expresses culpability, humility, and repentance. These qualities can be viewed as key antecedents to forgiveness. Next, the visiting *Matai* sits under a 'ie toga (mat) and waits. The victim's family, community, and *Matai* take whatever time they deem necessary to formulate their response. Transformation can occur within people as they wait. When the time is ripe, the *Matai* of the offended person and family lifts the mat off the visiting *Matai* and invites the visiting party for a meal. These symbolic gestures signal that the visitors' apology has been accepted and forgiveness has been granted. A meal is then shared; the *Matai's* typically speak; and the offender's community give gifts to express gratitude for the forgiveness and peace that have been extended to them.

L. Gregory Jones argues in his seminal book *Embodying Forgiveness* that a Christian account of forgiveness ought not simply, or even primarily, be focused on "absolution of guilt; the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness."[35] *Ifoga* facilitates these goals. It grounds people in a larger story. It also sanctions *Ifoga*'s numerous witnesses to assist both parties to maintain their forgiveness if it is challenged in the future.

We know that some offences defy categorisation. Their destructive effects have an unfathomable reach. In this light, *Ifoga* can be used to explore the complex issue of how groups might forgive groups and nations might forgive nations. Of course, one of the many challenges facing forgiveness efforts on this scale is that there will always be a variety of reactions. Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, would have experienced this when she used *Ifoga* to convey a formal apology to the Pasifika community for the Dawn Raids that had occurred 40 plus years earlier. For some people, the lifting of the mat off the Prime Minister was a ritual that symbolised forgiveness. For others it may have felt hollow—too little, too late—or insincere. For one police officer I spoke with it represented an afront, because in his eyes the police were enforcing the law, which was their job. For others, it may have signalled hope for a new beginning, which in part will be dependent on the government making and keeping meaningful promises to assuage the *unpredictability* of the future.[36] For me, it pointed to the miracle and mystery of atonement.

When I ponder the *Matai*, community leaders, and the Prime Minister of New Zealand sitting under 'ie toga, I am reminded of my own sin, and my need for a *big person* to stand in the gap for me. When I read Christa's insights on Christ's atoning work, the work that *Ifoga* points to, a paean, a song of praise, wells up inside me. I am humbled, grateful, and inspired to risk forgiveness even though I do not comprehend the depths of atonement.

---

[35] L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 5.
[36] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34.

Leon Morris argues that the New Testament writers all wrote about what they saw and each saw the unfolding of the events differently; yet "they did not see something different."[37] Similarly, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Susan and Lucy did not comprehend the intricacies of Aslan's (i.e., Christ's) death and resurrection.[38] But this did not stop them from being swept up into Aslan and benefiting from his sacrificial love. I wonder if there is a lesson for us here—namely, that the wonder of atonement can be experienced without the doctrine being fully understood.[39]

Remarkable and instructive as *Ifoga* is, it clearly is not the only effective path to forgiveness and reconciliation. Alternative strategies are needed, as no two situations are identical. One is to cover over smaller offences (1 Pet. 4:8). Another is laid out in Matthew 18: 15-17 whereby wounded persons are exhorted to go and confront the people who injured them, which is different from *Ifoga* where those who do the harm need to go to the people they harmed. In all instances the goal is to regain those who have strayed (see: Mt. 18: 12-14) and heal fractured relationships. This focus needs to be kept in mind when considering what forgiveness strategy to employ, but it does not mean that models or processes cannot be adapted to your specific circumstances.[40]

CONCLUSION

For any apology to be sincerely received, it must be offered through meaningful and culturally appropriate ways. The goal of an apology is to prevent further harm to those involved and welcome healing, restoration of justice and relationship. The *Ifoga* is an effective way of offering an apology and can be done in multiple ways that will still honour its origins and those involved and, as we have seen in our learnings from each other, can provide a powerful imaginary for conceiving of the atoning work of Jesus.

We can all learn a great deal from *Ifoga*. While we do not think that *Ifoga* can be done apart from Fa'a Samoa, we do believe that the principles and insights of *Ifoga* ought to be spread far and wide. This might entail local churches inviting Samoan friends and educators into their meetings to teach them about *Ifoga* and the richness of communal living. Or it may mean visiting existing communities to learn how to live more interdependently. What it *will* require is humility, an openness to learning new skills, and the acceptance of the truth that we are all indispensable organs of the same body (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Our world is deeply wounded and broken. Educating people about *Ifoga*, about forgiveness, therefore has never been more important than it is today.

I, Tanya, believe the practice of *Ifoga* can be misunderstood and challenged if those involved do not fully understand the value, methodology, and practise of an *Ifoga*. Some Western conceptions of forgiveness

---

[37] Leon Morris, "Atonement," *NBD*, 2nd ed., 104-106, 104.
[38] See: C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: HarperCollins, 1950).
[39] Philip John Halstead, vol. 1 of "Forgiveness Matters: A Psychometric and Qualitative Study of the Development of a Forgiveness Course for New Zealand Churchgoing Adults Exploring Their Parental Relationships," (PhD diss., The University of Auckland, 2009), 84.
[40] For instance, if you deem it is unsafe to confront a violator, but you believe you must, why not take a few supporters to the first meeting?

vary from a Samoan's perspective. Western society is often self-dependent; therefore, forgiveness is a personal decision. If forgiveness is not given, the dissolving of a relationship or disassociation from others is easily done.[41] By contrast, Samoan culture is collective, where each person is connected to each other, like Phil mentioned earlier, we are stronger together. The importance of maintaining peace and harmony is that relationships cannot be in disarray and dissolved. Further, as Christa mentioned earlier, the *Ifoga* ritual communicates the ongoing nature of relationship which connects powerfully with Jesus's ongoing work of atonement.

A few years ago, I witnessed my father (a Reverend Minister) act as a scapegoat on behalf of my cousin whose marital situation involved a suicidal death. The preparation of our family took longer than the actual *Ifoga*! We travelled to the house of the family in Māngere, Auckland. On arrival, as my aunties were preparing to cover my father who was kneeling on the ground, the father of the deceased came rushing out yelling, *Leai! Aua! Faamolemole taofi* (No! Do not! Please Stop!). He tore away the 'ie toga from my father, made him stand and embraced him. He did not want my father nor our family to be connected to this shame. My father's willingness to be the scapegoat was enough to precipitate forgiveness and reconciliation. Such a powerful picture of forgiveness has much to offer to the church and the world, and we hope this article contributes toward reshaping the Christian imaginary for what this can look like.

[41] Kari A. Terzino, "Culture and Forgiveness: A Prototype Perspective," (PhD diss., Iowa State University, 2007), 4.