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RESEARCH ARTICLE

NAVIGATING ACADEMIC PRIVILEGE: THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR PASIFIKA COMMUNITIES

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Abstract
This article scrutinises various aspects of academic privilege, integrating some of the challenges I faced and the insights gained while furthering my theological education. Inspired by the complex roles of a tautai (Samoan traditional navigator), the article is structured in three parts. The first section seeks to undefine privilege by interrogating the infamous prestige afforded to those in leadership positions, highlighting why such privilege is both a blessing and an unenviable task. Part two redefines privilege as a relational responsibility, namely, to serve in and between intersecting spaces. The third and last part engages the field of theology, where the author's own privileges are addressed, and a challenge is issued to those in academic spaces regarding the repurposing of one's position and privilege in service of his or her communities.

Keywords
academic privilege, responsibility, community, interspatial, colonial

Educate yourself enough
So you may understand
The ways of other people
But not too much
That you may lose

Your understanding
Of your own

Tate Simi (2016, 14)

Introduction

The decision to write about academic privilege leaves me somewhat exposed. I am a theological educator who was trained in both Western and Pasifika institutions. I also made it a personal mission to join the growing number of Pasifika scholars who tell their stories in academic spaces. Unbeknownst to me, the field I was entering was highly contentious. By the time I completed my doctorate and began identifying as an academic or researcher, the whole notion of research had come under fire for its extractive and exploitive nature. For years, I would downplay and even deny the labels, as though the guilt of the knowledge systems that manipulated community-owned information for personal, institutional, or political gain was now my mine to bear. I found myself apologising for my position and its privileges—something I would later realise, in hindsight, was a great disservice to my parents, siblings, wife, and family, who had made many sacrifices to help me reach where I am today. It also made me question, particularly during the course of this writing, whether it is possible nowadays for one to be an academic without shame.

Inspired by the complex roles of a tautai (Samoan traditional navigator), I have structured the discussion in three parts. The first focuses on undefining privilege, where I question, from the perspective of tautai wisdom, the alleged prestige and authority of those in leadership positions. This section explains why privilege is not just a blessing but one imbued with unenviable challenges, responsibilities, and limitations. Part two then turns to redefine privilege as a relational task, namely, to serve in and between intersecting spaces. These interspaces include the intergenerational relationships within my family, the place of Pasifika scholars within the academy, and the unique contributions of an indigenous researcher. In the third part, I turn to the field of theology. I particularly look at my own privileges, before addressing the need for imagination and diversity. This is followed by theological insights regarding ways in which those of us in academic spaces can potentially repurpose our privileges to benefit our Pasifika communities.

Undefining Privilege: E lē sili le ta'i nai lo o le tapuai

I begin this section with two housekeeping matters. Firstly, although 'undefined' exists as an adjective in the English language, describing something that is unclear, I intentionally use 'undefine' here as a verb conveying the actions of undoing or unlearning. The point of undefining here is not so much to obscure the meaning of privilege, but rather to disassociate privilege from its academic baggage, thus establishing the need for an alternative. Secondly,

although a theological researcher is what I have in mind when referring to a tautai in this work, the notion itself can be applied generally to a leader of any undertaking (academic or otherwise). My focus on the field of theology is merely to highlight the specific challenges that I faced, although the hope is that my experiences resonate with scholars throughout the region from different fields.

According to local Samoan wisdom, a tautai has the power of command during a voyage or fishing expedition. That power, however, is not without its limits. While often interpreted as a position of privilege and authority, the actual role of a tautai comes with grave responsibilities. The expression 'e lē sili le ta'i nai lo o le tapuai' which translates as 'a leader is no more important than the prayers of the community', serves as a reminder of leaders' accountability to their communities and reflects the common understanding that absolute power never rests solely with those at the helm.

And while I admit that I have indulged in the perks of being an academic tautai, I have had my fair share of criticism levelled against me. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Much has been written on the infamous privileges that have been abused by researchers. For instance, when researchers think it is okay to breach cultural protocols so long as the end justifies the means (Smith 2012, 26), or when research methods prioritise only the interests of the academy and those among its ranks (Aiava 2024), or when the traditional knowledge extracted from communities is misappropriated or worse, becomes the intellectual property of a selected few (Koya Vakauta 2023, 137–38). Irrespective of these flaws, there remains a serious need to undefine what privilege means beyond the usual confines of academia.

The Outsider Privilege

In my appeal to the metaphor of a tautai, it is worth noting that the main premise of being selected as a tautai is owed largely to one's familiarity with the seas and navigational skills. This means that a tautai is not normally considered an outsider to the seas. However, Samoan proverbial wisdom also maintains that knowledge of the deep should not be taken for granted and thus requires a more collaborative consciousness. For our purposes, I draw on three common sayings that attest to this. First, 'a worthy tautai is decided by the ocean'. Second, 'even the most knowledgeable of tautai cannot predict a rogue bonito (fish)'. And third, 'successful expeditions are backed by prayer'.[1] These expressions suggest that even at the peak of one's skills and knowledge, a tautai never possesses full command of the seas and ocean life—a humble reminder to those in leadership that their strength comes from the communities they serve and not individual brilliance.

1 Translated from: (i) E fili e le tai le tautai e agavaa, (ii) E poto a le tautai ae sē lava le atu i le ama (iii) o faiva e tapuaia, o faiva e manuia.

In the context of academia, including cases where the researcher and the community being researched are quite familiar with each other, there remain limits to what we know or think we know. Based on his experience in the field of anthropology, Epeli Hau'ofa had this to say:

> Although I entered the discipline by accident, I was eventually attracted to it perhaps because it was a case of courtship between birds of the same feather. I studied other people, I wrote about them, I liked most of them, but I could never become one of them. This is true of all anthropologists. However much we understand and like the people of the cultures we study, we always remain outside their charmed circles. As one remains outside, one is exposed to the elements that can chill the soul and heighten the sense of isolation as one looks into a house where the hearth glows, the beds are soft, and the laughter peals are infectious. I often long to enter, to belong to the community in which I live at any particular time; but only in Tonga, for reasons of ancestry, and forced and voluntary identification, could I come close to belonging, as I have described here. (2008, 104)

It is intriguing that even in his ancestral homeland, Hau'ofa acknowledges coming close to becoming an insider yet admits never feeling like one. Was this a consequence of his overseas education? Was it a passage rite that those doing 'objective' studies usually go through? Or was it a demonstration of intellectual modesty? I suspect it is a combination of all three. And though the author seems to lament feeling like an outsider, I am curious as to whether maintaining this outsider position could be perceived more optimistically.

Fa'aeaea: An Extrinsic Privilege

I am also convinced that the chilling experience mentioned above is not entirely self-induced. In another familiar occurrence, for academics within communities that is, Hau'ofa (2008) mentions times where his community leaders would often seek his 'expert' opinion on matters beyond his field of specialisation. He observed, with reference to the Pasifika landscape in the 1960s and the 1970s, how promoters of native peoples showered greatness on persons with postgraduate degrees in the name of localisation and regionalisation. This had 'weird effects on these peoples' attitudes and consequently on the lives of those around them' (Hau'ofa 2008, 103). I have also experienced this as a theologian in my community. Regardless of how often I gave advice (theological or otherwise), prefaced with disclaimers disqualifying its widespread application, it did not deter my community leaders or my peers from seeking my input.

In Samoa, this act of recognising the achievements of select individuals is known as fa'aeaea, an honour which is not necessarily self-designated but rendered by others. This is not to say that island intellectuals are immune to the allure of the academic limelight, but rather to state that in many Pasifika communities, the honourable status placed on 'schooled persons' is extrinsic to those receiving it (Sanga 2021). In these instances, where the received honour is enough to make an intellectual feel like an imposter, the privilege is an unenviable one. Since the fa'aeaea of communities is beyond the control of its recipients, the onus is on the recipient to exercise humility or, more frankly, not let the privilege get to one's head. The most obvious way around this, I believe, would be to charter an alternate course where one's privilege could be manoeuvred for the common good of those on the giving and receiving ends.

The Myth of Omniscience (All-knowing)

In another tautai wisdom, there is the expression 'do not be deceived by the calm tide on a given morning'.[2] This wisdom is often uttered as a warning for leaders to not only prepare for the unknown but also be content with not knowing everything. It is with regard to the latter that I think the need to undefine privilege is most needed in academia. That is, in its claims of omniscience. As alluded to earlier, the outsider status of a researcher is usually a given, and thus neither new nor inherently problematic. I also do not see the extrinsic privileges rendered by communities (faaeaea) as problematic since this honour is beyond the control of the learned and, more often than not, comes with responsibilities. The crux of my dilemma comes after an academic tautai is granted access to community-owned knowledge. This privilege, often entrusted on the premise that the researcher genuinely wanted to learn more about the other, ends up being exploited.

Instead of engaging in mutually enriching dialogue, Western-trained researchers deploy highly individualised tools that not only encourage the extraction of information, but also serve the interests of the degree-granting establishment. This results in the latter controlling what is said or written about the community in question, blatantly ignoring the collective consciousness and the trust that enabled the access in the first place.

It is from this all-knowing position that self-proclaimed or externally verified experts are created. Though many of these individuals may mean well, particularly as they echo some of the ongoing struggles observed in the field, many end up speaking from an all-knowing position inaccessible to the communities they intend to represent. The result, particularly when experts become unaware of their privileges, is the perpetuation of a saviour complex.

2 Translated from 'aua nei e seetia i le malu o le tai taeao'.

This one-way agenda not only creates a rift between academic institutions and indigenous communities, but it also fuels a climate of mistrust between the two. What is most concerning, with reference to the academy, is the effect this will have on the growing number of young Pasifika students progressing to higher education across the region. It is for that reason that I think redefining privilege is warranted.

Redefining Privilege: Tautua i le vā (Interspatial Responsibilities)

Although I was trained in theology, I was compelled through the faaeaea of my family to reach some level of proficiency in other fields. Most of the time, I am some sort of linguist, translating written or spoken English into Samoan and vice versa. This role came with tasks like analysing literature, clarifying legal policies, proofreading essays, writing speeches, or acting like an on-demand thesaurus for big complicated words. And though deflecting these tasks has been futile, it eventually developed in me a sense of appreciation for the trust already invested in me. This unique placement and its embedded responsibilities culminate into what I call an interspatial privilege. That is, the privilege to navigate the spaces in and between the two languages including the values, worldviews, and epistemologies of its creators (Prior 2019).

Inspired by his responsibilities to both his family and church, Vaitusi Nofoaiga (2017) deemed this life of in-between service as tautua i le *vā* (meaning to serve in the spaces). Though, for symbolic reasons, he purposely omits the spaces between the words and uses 'tautuaileva' instead. In Nofoaiga's view, the latter is more accurate of his research location which not only places him between the Samoan and Christian cultures but also demonstrates what he perceives to be a gapless integration of both cultures (2017, 39–40). Though I would not go as far as claiming the two cultures are without gaps, I concur that this interspatial vā comes with a responsibility to bring the distinct realities into a mutual dialogue.

This privilege, which places me within the academic halls of theology and within my family and community, is never without responsibility. At a deeper level, I felt more like a double-agent whose objective was to maintain diplomacy between the competing worldviews innate to the various spaces. Within my own household—consisting of three generations—the internal diversities and value systems can be so apparent that it makes decision making a painstaking process. On a good day we reach a consensus or happy medium. But on a bad day, a decision is imposed from the top and everyone goes away dissatisfied. My placement in the middle of these generations thus comes with the delicate responsibility to facilitate that the needs on both ends are somehow met.

Navigating Colonial Spaces in the Academy

This in-between role is what initially attracted me to cultural critic, Homi K. Bhabha, and in particularly his theory of mimicry.[3] Regarding formal education, Bhabha (2004) believed that one of the biggest flaws in colonial discourse had to do with its attempt to produce compliant subjects. Although the goal was that the educated subjects would soon mimic the values and assumptions of the dominant culture, the result was that it produced ambivalent subjects whose behaviours exhibited more mockery than obedience (Bhabha 2004, 172). Most interesting to me about this contentious space (between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised) is not its capacity to entertain mockery or what Bhabha refers to earlier as 'sly civility' (2004, 133–44), but rather in its openness for negotiation and renegotiation.

These interspaces, which Bhabha (2004) prefers to label 'third space', have not only provided an effective means through which minority cultures could negotiate their identities, but they have also enabled indigenous scholars to speak confidently within the academy. It is for that reason that Bhabha's 'third space of hybridity' has become a staple in the general literature on coloniality and in postcolonial theology.

While seemingly inviting, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) warns that this space was one invented by Western intellectuals to conveniently dismiss nativist thinking while simultaneously maintaining the power to define the world. She argued that this is why many indigenous intellectuals choose not to participate in postcolonial discourse. 'For each indigenous intellectual who actually succeeds in the academy—and we are talking relatively small numbers—there is a whole array of issues about the ways we relate inside and outside of our own communities, inside and outside the academy, and between all those different worlds' (Smith 2012, 14). It was to that end that I purposely refrained from identifying as a postcolonial scholar out of fear that this celebrated space does not itself become a closed fixture within the academy thereby losing its fluidity or, worse, autonomy. The choice to use interspaces, therefore, intends to maintain the plurality of the intersecting realities so that the complexities between the worlds and the internal diversities in each are not conflated.

3 Bhabha was born and raised in India and did his postgraduate studies in Oxford. He held prominent positions in various tertiaries including the University of Sussex and later Harvard. His work has not only been in instrumental in postcolonial studies, particularly his analysis of hybrid cultures in postcolonial contexts, but also in the way that he challenged the so-called binary between the colonised and coloniser.

For Pasifika scholars, this reassigned place within an already limited space is patronising, as though being instructed to 'aim small miss small'.[4] It not only goes against the understanding that it is one's service (tautua) of the interspaces (vā) that defines the tautai, but it is also a missed opportunity with respect to what an individual—including his or her communities—stands to gain from the encounter.

One of these opportunities, says Shawn Wilson (2008), is in our capacity to bring new perspectives to the table. In his words,

> one of the great strengths that Indigenous scholars bring with them is the ability to see and work within both the Indigenous and dominant worldviews. This becomes of great importance when working with dominant system academics, who are usually not bicultural. As part of their white privilege, there is no requirement for them to be able to see other ways of being and doing, or even to recognise that they exist. Oftentimes then, ideas coming from a different worldview are outside of their entire mindset and way of thinking. The ability to bridge this gap becomes important in order to ease the tension that it creates. (Wilson 2008, 44)

Navigating Research Spaces

To what degree then, if at all, could an academic tautai bridge the needs of his or her communities and the institutions they serve? One of my major struggles in higher education, particularly as I began doing research, had to do with presenting my ideas in the third person. My first issue is that it imposes a language of distance that isolates the researcher from his or her own work encouraging students to prioritise universal concepts at the expense of any meaningful particularities arising from personal experience. My second issue is that it promotes an institutionalised ownership of knowledge, where any discovery worth having becomes the property of the all-knowing institution that verified it. This puts researchers at a double disadvantage. It is bad enough that island scholars have to be invisible in their own work, but the expectation for them to address the self as other or through the eyes of the other makes it far worse.

It was not until I commenced studies at the Pacific Theological College that I discovered a deep passion to write as me and with the 'us' of community. This to me was more than being granted permission to speak in the first person. It was a formal recognition that I am also a community whose interests were not strictly individual and whose

5 In a similar manner, Hau'ofa described indigenous scholars as being a small nebulous group of elites. Despite being like-minded and sharing many similarities, this group of individual writers, poets, and scholars often worked independently of one another due mainly to their being isolated in their own islands. On the rare occasions that they did cross paths at conferences, it was a coin toss whether it would be as friends or as enemies (2008, 102).

objectives were not limited to those of the institution. This relational mindset was most evident whenever I read a book, heard something new in a course, or uncovered something rare. In such cases my objective was always twofold. The first was to store information relevant to my studies and professional development. The second was to set aside pearls of wisdom that I could share later with friends and families beyond the academy. Like the dishonest worker that keeps taking office supplies home, this was something that I did subconsciously most probably because I was the only one in my immediate family to receive a scholarship. It was then, as I became a lot more intentional with asserting the interests of my community, that my research went from being a mere means to a degree to a catalyst for change.

Today, I now have the privilege of teaching and supervising other research students. Though much has changed, my attitude to research remains the same as I continue to push the conventional boundaries of academia. I do this by encouraging our aspiring scholars to be proud of their indigeneity and to showcase in their writing both the good and the bad of their cultures. The point is so the cognitive dissonance of wanting to attain an academic degree without losing one's identity in the process becomes an opportunity for empowerment. For Aisake Casimira (2004), this dissonant space is where research can play a transformative role. It can be done as a protest—not just holy thoughts on paper (think: theological reflections) but as a holy deed (think: praxis) carried out intently to liberate. It can be our unique contribution to knowledge—legitimising not just the stories of who we are, but also our own ways of storytelling. Lastly, it can be a gift to our people—documenting our values and identities ensuring their continuity (Casimira 2024).

Privileging Theology: Mataupu Silisili

I turn now to what may be perceived by some to be an elephant in the room, namely, my choice to study Christian theology. For Samoans, this career path is an esteemed one that comes with social, political and, occasionally but not always, economic privileges. For many parents, particularly those from the baby boomer generation and earlier, it is a dream come true when at least one of their offspring enters church ministry. The word 'theology' itself is translated most widely as mataupu silisili or the highest discipline, where 'highest' (silisili) often points to the spiritual character of theology. Whether this translation can be attributed to the attitudes of Samoa's older generations or to Europe of the Middle Ages when theology was labelled 'queen of the sciences' (Jasper 2004, 46), is uncertain. What I do know is that my participation in theology puts me in position of dual privileges regarding my standing within the academy and in the church. In this work's efforts to redefine privilege as responsibility rather than prestige, I have equally contended that a

more constructive use of privilege is warranted. It is to that end that I offer in this final section, theological insights on some potential uses of one's privileged position.

On Symbol and Imagination

What fascinated me most about theology is its emphasis on symbols. Maybe this is because theology itself is a symbolic language written, spoken, and transmitted through images and allegories rich with meaning. Or perhaps it had something to do with the way that symbols inevitably engage the imagination. Take for instance one of the most prominent symbols of Christianity embodied through the person of Jesus (Haight 1999). Through Jesus, we mortals not only witnessed the in-breaking of the divine realm, but we also encountered God in human form—the flesh not taking away from Jesus' divinity, nor his divinity making him any less human. For the rational mind, the two natures are diametrically opposed, as fire is to water. But for the faithful imagination, it is the mystery who is God.

This mystery has for centuries captured the imagination of not just theologians, but Christians in general, given that symbols, much like the communities where the symbols first found expression, are fluid and constantly changing. The reason, says Paul Tillich (1969), is that religious symbols are born from a creative encounter with reality. Religious symbols are true when they fulfil the need for which they were created; and they also die or disappear if the situation in which they were created has passed (Tillich 1969, 109, 113).

This dialectic between symbol and the collective imagination was evident in the heyday of Pasifika contextual theology, where many seized the opportunity to reimagine God through the use of cultural symbols. It was not only characteristic of dissertations produced by PTC students since its inception in 1965, but it was also central to the then vision and mission statement of the college. Of course, as is the changing nature of symbols and the cultural diversities and changes within the communities that give them meaning, it was inevitable that some symbols would resonate more than others.

Take for instance a recent debate on social media regarding an artistic depiction of the crucified Christ as a sogaimiti (a male bearing the Samoan traditional tattoo). The image attracted heavy criticism as if it was the first contextualised image of its kind. The majority of the critics said it was disrespectful to Jesus' Jewish culture, some going as far as calling it blasphemy. Others accused the artist of limiting salvation exclusively to Samoa and its chiefs. Theologian or not, I welcomed the artist's creativity and daringness to reimagine the symbol of Christ from a different perspective. More specifically, it made me curious about the theological significance of the body or tino (Samoan) and the intention behind it. Was the portrayal of the Samoan body meant as a celebration of our traditional culture? Or was it a protest from bodies often relegated to the margins?

I was reminded of Eve Parker's (2022) argument that all knowledge begins in the body, though not all bodies or bodies of knowledge are treated equally.

> Some bodies are deemed problems, inconveniences, irrelevant, indecent and therefore incapable of being producers of knowledge—their experiences are often reduced to anecdotes, while the bodies of the privileged elites are the knowledge holders and truth bearers who shape and determine what should be deemed 'real theology'. (Parker 2022, 31)

In Pasifika, the tino or body is not limited to the individual and his or her relatives, but rather goes beyond the human—encompassing the whole of life. For Upolu Vaai (2017), the tino not only embodies the relations of land, sea and sky, but it is also through which God relates to the world.[5] Whether or not it was intended by the artist, these connections and stories are symbolised in the Samoan traditional tattoo. Like many other forms of indigenous knowledge, there are images often dismissed as body art or replaced in formal education by dominant epistemologies. Could the artwork represent Christ in solidarity with such communities, namely, indigenous peoples coerced into disowning their own bodies as sources of knowledge?

It was apparent in the online debates that many were either unwilling to acknowledge the body as a source of theology or they were driven by the misconceived notion that indigenous cultures do not change. According to Smith, 'what counts as authentic is used by the West as one of the criteria to determine who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, who is still innocent and free from Western contamination' (2012, 77). When this is internalised by Pasifika peoples, a wedge is driven between those that perceive themselves to be authentic to the culture from those perceived as non-authentic. In Smith's words, 'at the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege' (2012, 77).

Perhaps there lies the invitation for both Western and Pasifika contexts. That is, to invent and reinvent our cultures and cultural symbols. For Garrett Green (2000, 15–16), it is exemplary of 'imaginative faithfulness'—where we acknowledge that we are earthen vessels of God's truths, that we hold those truths not as masters but stewards, and that these truths were given in forms that can only be grasped by imagination. Without this imagination, the language and symbols of theology run the risk of losing its vibrancy or worse, relevance.

5 In Vaai's 'Tino Theology', he explains how God, through the Son, enters into relationship with the whole tino—land, sea, skies, people, communities and ancestors. Also, through the Spirit, God is woven into the dynamics and rhythms of the tino (2017, 234).

Reconstituting Diversity through Jesus

In relation to the way Jesus himself responded to the different identifications projected onto him, Elizabeth Malbon (2003) conducted an interesting study of Jesus' identity according to the Gospel of Mark. In her view, neither Jesus nor the author was responsible for labelling Jesus the 'Son of Man' or, 'Lord of the Sabbath', as in the story where Jesus and his disciples break Sabbath protocols (Mark 2:27–28). Instead, it was the various characters in the narrative, and the implied audience, that make the connection. For instance, after forgiving the sins of the paralytic man resulting in his healing (2:5), Jesus reminded the scribes in attendance that such authority on Earth belonged to the Son of Man (2:10). Since Jesus refers to the Son of Man in the third person and never explicitly says, 'I am the Son of Man,' it meant that it was his listeners, and Mark's implied readers, that were responsible for the Christological rendering.

What transpires is something Malbon calls refracted or deflected Christology (2003, 373–74). This occurs when Jesus 'refracts' the differing perspectives that the disciples and others have about his identity, resulting not in a uniform understanding of Jesus, but an array of views regarding who he was for each. Malbon (2003, 374) goes further to describe this process using the analogy of a prism—as Jesus bends the views projected toward him from others, the phenomenon is like that of a prism when held up to the light, refracting or bending white light to reveal its spectral colours.

This symbolic representation of Jesus as a prism correlates with my own understanding of theology, namely, to relate to the mystery of God in ways accessible to us, acknowledging that God cannot be strictly defined as this or that, but is free to manifest Godself as a colourful spectrum of divinity. Taking nothing away from John Macquarrie's classic definition of theology, where its central task is to express the content of the Christian faith 'in the clearest and most coherent language available' (1966, 1), I am curious whether theologians actually account for the politics, limitations, and the evolving nature of language. Going back further to Anselm's definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' reiterated by Migliore (2014), one gets the sense that theology's initial task was to integrate the realms of faith and reason. However, somewhere in the process, particularly as theology morphed into the highly intellectualised discipline it is today, reason assumed a more omniscient position leaving artistic expression at the margins!

Invitation to Interpret Anew

Even in biblical interpretation, the meanings of texts are seldom taken on face value nor are they interpreted from a place of omniscience. Since the words themselves point to meanings both seen and unseen, readers of the Bible—like the tautai—are encouraged to navigate with humility. One way of doing this is through metaphor. For Sallie McFague

(1987), metaphors are our most readily available resource in our attempts to understand the mystery of God. She argues that there is no other aspect of the universe that we know in the same way with the privilege of the insider. So rather than speaking about God from an all-knowing position, McFague uses the personal metaphors of Mother, Lover, and Friend. Although the sacred space (vā) between her and the divine mystery remains, the metaphors do provide her with a more intimate way of relating to God as 'radically relational, immanental, interdependent and noninterventionist' (1987, 82–83).

Church historian, Vicente Diaz (2010), raised a similar point regarding the need to interrogate the established meanings of texts. Dissatisfied with the official hagiography of Diego Luis de San Vitores—the first missionary turned martyr in Guam, Diaz (2010) turns his focus instead on unofficial and unwritten accounts from the Chamorro community. He calls this the 'oral cavity' in many of the Catholic Church's official documents, claiming that 'the modern concern with factuality and with credible source documents, was secondary to the belief that if God was working through the individual in question, *that* truth (and its practical value for nurturing faith) was what really mattered' (Diaz 2010, 56). Like McFague (1987), Diaz (2010) chooses not to limit himself to one interpretation or even the most conventional. Rather, he draws from alternative sources that were not only available to him, but also proved to be more meaningful.

I accept, coming from a Reformed Protestant tradition and from the years of engaging other Pasifika Christians, that the infallible authority of scripture or *sola scriptura* carries enormous weight. But *sola scriptura* was not intended to mean at the expense of oral histories, traditions, or the ever-changing experiences of the church. Given that the church has been the primary interpretive context of the Bible since its inception, there remains an ongoing need to renew not just our interpretive practices but also the church itself. The reason, says George Zachariah, is that the church even at its best, remains a frail and fallible human institution— 'The church, because of who we are, remains open to always being reformed' (2020, 89).

Part of this reform is the need to read the Bible with fresh perspectives, to seek alternative meanings and symbols, and to ask what else the Bible could be saying for our times. This brings with it an opportunity to read with and for the vulnerable among us. In Judith Rossall's (2020) reinterpretation of the Bible from the perspectives of those struggling with shame, she makes the case that the overemphasis on guilt and sin in mainstream literature has neglected the actual victims who have been sinned against. In her words,

> [w]e are complicated creatures and God is ultimately beyond our understanding; theology must therefore perform a balancing act that holds equally important truths

> in tension. If we fail to take the broader message into account we can leave people struggling with toxic shame. What is more, we are likely to become more and more irrelevant to a world that is very concerned with issues such as self-esteem and self-worth. (Rossall 2020, vii–viii)

With her balancing act culminating in the world's ultimate shaming moment, God nailed to the cross, Rossall (2020) not only offers a great example of why reading the Bible anew is necessary for all, but also of how we, theologians, can use our privilege to serve the vulnerable in our communities.

Conclusion

This article set out initially to develop an outline for a Communities-based approach to theological research, intended as a resource for Pasifika students. However, the more I looked into the tautai wisdom of Samoa and some of the insights from theology, the more I saw my own image saturated in privilege. Through the benefit of hindsight, I recognised a more pressing need for me to first deal with the numerous privileges I used and likely misused as an intellectual. Was this new trajectory a blessing in disguise? I think so—given that I have been practicing theology in my family and communities for some time, without articulating responsibly how I was doing it or from what position.

In my efforts to undefine the meaning of academic privilege, I came to the conclusion that human knowledge is finite and that is perfectly fine. The claim to omniscience by the academy is not only foreign to Pasifika contexts, but it is also divisive in communities built on trust and mutual learning. By redefining privilege as an interspatial responsibility, I highlight the various spaces where an academic tautai can potentially serve as a family or community mediator, as an open-minded academic, or as a proud island-researcher in colonial spaces. While these are contentious spaces, I argue that indigenous intellectuals stand to learn more about themselves and the world from navigating the deep, instead of settling for the liminal spaces afforded to them.

In my turn to theology, I gave examples of why not knowing everything is both a human thing and an opportunity to engage the imagination. As demonstrated in my discussions of Jesus being both the symbol and the mystery who is God, there are elements in the Christian faith that cannot be fully rationalised or verified by written facts or cut off from artistic expression. It was on this basis that I posited three invitations. The first is an invitation to reconstitute the diversities that exist within our cultures as embodied in Jesus' multiple identities and natures. The second is an invitation to interpret God anew where both the church and its interpretive practices are called to remain in a continuous state of reform. The third is an invitation to read the Bible with the vulnerable in our

communities. Rather than resent our positions as academic 'insiders', the examples above are intended to offer some ways where we can repurpose our privileges in the service of others. Although it is by no means a comprehensive guide for doing theology or research in communities, I can only hope that I am on the right track or, at the very least, offer an important first step.

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