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THEOLOGICAL SESSION 1
“#MeToo: Troubling Sexual Abuse in Scriptures”

By Nasili Vaka’uta

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Tēnā koutou!
Ko *Fungafonua* te maunga
Ko *Kahana* te awa
Ko *Lomipeau* te waka
Ko *Tonga* te iwi
Ko *Fakala’ā* te marae
Ko *Nāsili* tōku ingoa
Nō reira, kei aku rangatira,
Tēnā koutou katoa.

Tapu mo e ‘afio ‘a e ‘Otua Mafimafi; tapu ki he Palesiteni mo e Tokoni Palesiteni; tapu ki he ha’ofanga ni, pea tulou mo e tala-kuo-aofaki, kae fakahoko e fatongia ko eni kuo fakakoloa’aki ‘a e kau faiako ‘a e ako’anga faka-faifekau ‘a e Siasi Metotisi ‘o Niu Sila. Fine’eiki Palesiteni, tulou tomu’a atu he koe fakahoha’a ni ‘e hualela!

My task this morning is twofold: one is to introduce the theological sessions assigned to the staff of Trinity College by the Presidential Team; the other to initiate a conversation about one of the key global issues of our time: *sexual abuse/violence*. Often times we avoid talking about critical issues like this one because silence is considered to be a safe and comfortable option. But in many cases, silence is dangerous and life-denying. So, in this session I challenge all of us to break the silence on sexual abuse and have a *kōrero/talanoa*, because it is inexcusable to be silent and hide behind culture, church and scripture. By the same token, it would be irresponsible to ignore cases of violence that occurred, covered up, validated and supported within the so-called sacred spaces of religion/church (**Note:** for those of you who have watched the movie, *Spotlight*, and the Netflix docuseries, *The Keepers*, you know what I am talking about).

Weaving Us Together to Proclaim Life

We have, since the induction of the new Presidential team on Saturday, been introduced to a new working theme for the next two years, that is, “*Weaving Us Together to Proclaim Life*.” With it comes *the call* to celebrate diversity, difference, and tension as we weave our different strands together to create a new “mat of life.” Likewise, we are *charged* to be instrumental in making sure that fullness of life becomes a reality for everyone and every

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member of the earth community.

Responding to this presidential challenge, the staff of Trinity College have structured the theological sessions in relation to three broad sub-themes:

- *Disrupting Abusive Systems—some systems/institutions are deadly!* Weaving us together to proclaim life needs to begin with an acknowledgement that there are abusive systems at work in our midst. As a church we will become complicit in promoting such systems if we, on the one hand, don't break the cultures of silence, and on the other hand, continue to cling on to some aspects of a theological tradition that is both irrelevant and delusional. Let's demolish systems of death and create a new structure of life!
- *Confronting Supremacist Narratives—the stories we tell and live by can be violent and dehumanizing!* Weaving us together to proclaim life demands that we confront narratives that validate slavery, bigotry, racism, homo-/bi-/trans-phobia, and all forms of discrimination and injustice. Let's disrupt narratives of death, and create a new narrative of life!
- *Re-visioning a Life-Affirming Future—because a future full of life is possible!* Weaving us together to proclaim life calls us to envision a future that is life-giving for us all. Such a future begins with the courage to move beyond the strict boundary of orthodoxy and ecclesial dogmatism. It involves empowering people to speak truth to power, speak the truth about power, and strive for justice, equality and fullness of life.

The #MeToo Movement

My talk this morning, “**#MeToo: Troubling Sexual Abuse in Scriptures,**” rides upon the wave of the current global #MeToo movement. This movement was born out of resistance against sexual violence with a vision of justice and healing. It began in 2006 as a grassroots movement founded by Tarana Burke, a black woman and victim of sexual abuse herself {see slide}. She sets the movement in motion

- to help survivors of sexual violence (particularly young women of colour from low income communities) find *pathways to healing*.
- Using the idea of “*empowerment through empathy,*” the movement was ultimately created to ensure survivors know they're not alone in their journey.

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- Since October 2017, the #MeToo movement has built a community of survivors from all walks of life, and they have brought the conversations about, and resistance against, sexual violence into the mainstream.
- Those at the forefront of the movement (most of them victims of sexual violence) decided to speak out against their abusers, most of whom have been powerful men (and a few women) from different sectors of society including the church. For that reason, the Time Magazine gave these courageous individuals the label, “The Silence Breakers,” and honoured them collectively as their 2017 Person of the Year {see slide}. This month of October marks the first year of the movement since it rippled far and wide through social media and became a global phenomenon.
- Riding on that wave,
 - they (leaders of the movement) are helping to *de-stigmatize* survivors by highlighting the breadth and impact sexual violence has on thousands of women and men alike;
 - they’re helping those who need to find entry points to healing;
 - they’re aiding the fight to end sexual violence worldwide;
 - they want to *uplift radical community healing as a social justice issue, and are committed to disrupting all systems that allow sexual violence to flourish* (for more information, please visit: <https://metoomvmt.org/>).

The key phrase here is “disrupting systems,” because any act of sexual abuse is not an isolated incident; it is symptomatic of a *violent-supportive system* that denies victims their humanity. Any attempt to end such violence requires a collective effort to dismantle/disrupt the system that allows it. There is a name for the system that supports sexual violence/abuse: *patriarchy!*

Dismantling Patriarchy {see slide}

To proclaim life and to realise the fullness of life, patriarchy has to be confronted and dismantled.

Patriarchy literally means ‘the rule of the father.’ In a Weberian sense, patriarchy can be defined as “a system of government in which men ruled societies through their position as heads of households” (p.19). From a feminist standpoint, patriarchy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (p.20). The use of the term “social structure” here is important – it implies a rejection of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one.

Another interesting take on patriarchy is from Gloria Jean Watkins, the American author, feminist, and social activist, who writes under the name “bell hooks.”

- She defines patriarchy as “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.”
- She also coins the phrase “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of American politics and society. Here, patriarchy is theorised alongside colonialism, racism and capitalism.
- As such, patriarchy becomes not only the oldest system of domination/oppression known to, and practiced by, humanity, but also “the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit.” That is, in the process of trying to dominate/oppress others, we are violently assaulting ourselves as well. Patriarchy in that sense is a self-destructive system; it’s not good for anybody! Such a system needs dismantling!

Patriarchy has several manifestations. One is what radical feminists called “rape culture.” Rape culture refers to a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality. Behaviours commonly associated with rape culture include *victim blaming*, *slut-shaming*, *sexual objectification*, *trivializing rape*, *denial of widespread rape*, *refusing to acknowledge the harm caused by some forms of sexual violence*, or some combination of these.

Another equally disturbing manifestation of patriarchy is *toxic masculinity*. This refers to society’s expectations of how a traditional male should behave. Ideas related to toxic masculinity have been normalized in society; comments like, “*be a man*,” “*that’s girly*,” and

“*man up*” stem from this attitude. It is important to underline that toxic masculinity relates to the cultural perspective given to masculinity, not the biological traits of the male gender. It is founded upon societal norms that frame cisgender men as the domineering gender, creating harmful stereotypes that incite violence and sexism across cultures. In addition, toxic masculinity disregards non-conforming genders, and imposes gender binarism (that is, the belief that only two genders exist), which allows the ongoing problem of homo-/bi-/trans-phobia in many societies, including ours.

Toxic masculinity enforces the societal ideology that males must attain control in relationships, the household, and in most public situations. This attitude promotes aversion towards expressing emotions that would be deemed as feminine for fear of emasculation. This is directly linked to the misogynistic mentality that male qualities are superior to feminine qualities.

Toxic masculinity seeps through everyday life, yet is often excused as normal behaviour, or “locker-room talk,” as we have seen during the recent US presidential election. Society uses the popular belief that “boys will be boys” to disregard, or deny, the existence of toxic masculinity. However, comments that reinforce the social hierarchy by placing traditional masculinity above femininity cannot be ignored. The normalization of this rhetoric underpins the continuing existence of toxic masculinity.

Ryan Douglas, in a column published in The Huffington Post (4/8/2017), describes *toxic masculinity* being built on two fundamental pillars: *sexual conquest* and *violence*. He further remarks: “If sex and aggression are the measuring sticks of manhood, it’s no wonder rape education remains a conversation of what women should be doing to not get raped rather than what men should be doing, which is not raping. *How can we hope to stop violent sexual behaviour if violence and sexuality are still considered primary virtues of manhood?*”¹

To end sexual and gender violence, patriarchy has to be demolished. Patriarchy is not just a male problem, it is everyone’s problem! The promotion and maintenance of patriarchy is not just a male business; a lot of women across cultures and religions are also complicit because they either benefit from patriarchy or yet to comprehend the violence involved.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-difference-between-masculinity-and-toxic-masculinity_us_59842e3ce4b0f2c7d93f54ce

Sexual Violence in Oceania/Aotearoa

This abusive system of patriarchy exists in our own societies in Oceania and here in Aotearoa. We only need to look at research findings to realise the severity of its impact. A research conducted in Tonga in 2009 sponsored by the Australian Government showed some troubling/disturbing figures:

- 79% of Tongan women and girls have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime
- 68% of Tongan women and girls are affected by physical violence perpetrated by mainly their fathers or teachers
- 33% of married or ever partnered women are victims of physical violence
- 17% of married or ever partnered women are victims of sexual violence
- 24% of married or ever partnered women are subject to emotional violence
- Perpetrators of violence are just as likely to be well respected and educated Tongan men²

These findings, tragically, are not mere statistics; they reflect disturbing #MeToo moments at home and settings women expect to find security but only experience fear and pain.

Here in Aotearoa, the crime figures from the 2018 State of the Nation Report (by Salvation Army) show that from 2015 to 2017, there have been 16,783 *reported* cases of sexual assault and related offences (5620 for 2015, 5430 for 2016, and 5733 for 2017). Statistics from the Rape Prevention Education website (<http://rpe.co.nz/>) are no different:

- 1 in 3 girls will be subject to an unwanted sexual experience by the age of 16 years. The majority of those incidences would be considered serious, with over 70% involving genital contact¹.
- Up to 1 in 5 women will experience sexual assault as an adult².

²National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Tonga (2009), xv.

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- For Maori girls and women, the likelihood of sexual violence is nearly twice as high as the general population³.
- Pacific and migrant women are also at statistically greater risk of sexual violence⁴.
- There are varying rates for sexual violence offences against males but large-scale international prevalence studies have tended to find a figure of 1 in 7 boys.
- Repeat sexual violence is a serious issue, with over 25% of adults in victimisation surveys reporting more than one incident, and qualitative research finding that survivors with a history of repeat victimisation are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and have high and complex needs.
- For women, experiencing child sexual abuse increases the likelihood of revictimization in adulthood of both intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence⁵.
- Young people are statistically at the highest risk of sexual assault; the age group 16-24 years being at the highest risk of sexual assault in any age group⁶.
- In opposition to widespread myths about stranger rape, it is estimated that 90% of sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim/survivor⁷.

Despite these figures, sexual violence, according to RPE, has a very low conviction rate in Aotearoa New Zealand, with only 13% of cases recorded by the Police resulting in conviction.

- Media reporting on issues of sexual violence is often under-informed and defends public myths and misconceptions about the dynamics of sexual violence.
- This misinformation affects society's shared understanding of and attitudes to sexual violence, promoting false narratives and rape-supportive attitudes in society.”

[\(http://rpe.co.nz/\)](http://rpe.co.nz/)

Sexual Abuse in Scriptures

Patriarchy shapes the narratives on, and attitudes to, sexual violence in scriptures. The Bible, despite the sacred status and authority attributed to it by ecclesial tradition, is a foreign place

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where norms are determined by imperial ethos, by slavery systems, and patriarchal values. These combined create an environment of aggression, domination and control.

Katie Edwards (a member of the Shiloh Project and co-editor [with Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan] of the three volumes on Rape Culture that just came out this year) points out “rape is endemic in the Bible (both literally and metaphorically) and, more often than not, functions as a conduit for male competition and a tool to uphold patriarchy.” She also notes that “a common thread in the biblical text is that women are responsible for maintaining their sexual “purity,” which is to ensure that as male properties, women remain “undamaged” and thereby maintain their “full market value” when “ownership” is handed over from father to husband at the time of marriage. Their interests and consent are never considered.

Here are a few examples of #MeToo moments in the bible:

Genesis 16: #HagarToo

In Gen 16, we are told that Abram went into Hagar obediently because of Sarai’s command. Throughout the narrative, Abram hardly spoke. The following points are worth noting:

- Abram, being the chosen one of God and recipient of God’s promise is portrayed positively as a passive, innocent male who took Sarai’s slave girl (without her consent) to serve Sarai’s interest.
- Sarai, the female figure, is painted as an impatient, barren wife who took matters into her own hand to bring to pass the promise of offspring (which by the way is a patriarchal concern)
- Abram is also positioned favourably as if he reluctantly “went into” Hagar (or abuse Hagar, the slave-girl) due to Sarai’s advice.
- The text is narrated in a way to persuade readers to believe that whatever went wrong it was Sarai’s fault, and what Hagar experienced was the norm because she had no control over her enslaved body. Consent therefore is out of the question, so this case is closed and most churches and Christians are comfortable with that.

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- *When churches normalize and internalize such narratives they are allowing the problem within the text to spill over into the contemporary context. Such narratives must be problematized and resisted.*

Genesis 19: #Lot'sDaughtersToo

In Gen 19, we encounter another patriarch who offered his “virgin” daughters to people of Sodom/Gomorrah *to save his male visitors*.

- Like Gen 16, this narrative also deals with producing male heirs and preserving the family line.
- But there is something fishy/suspicious about this story: the narrator got rid of those who were best candidates for the heir-producing job: namely, the sons in laws were left behind (because they were too busy partying), and Lot’s wife turned into a pillar (because she looked back). That leaves Lot and his two daughters.

We are told that instead of settling in Zoar, he moved with his daughters to a cave. In that cave, the narrative explained, the two daughters *whom no men knew* (“virgin”) were so concerned with preserving their father’s offspring. What follows is a classic feature of patriarchy, that is, shifting the blame to female characters and depicting the male figure as an innocent victim.

- They (the daughters) made their father get drunk with wine, and they slept with him
- Here, like the Hagar narrative, the female characters are portrayed negatively as if they were the perpetrators.
- Here again, Lot, the patriarchal figure is situated as an innocent father *who knew nothing* about what happened because *he was so drunk*.

In both cases, Abram and Lot are narrated to cover up the sexual abuse committed in the both narratives. *Covering up of sexual abuse/violence is a popular tool of patriarchy; a tool to manage male anxiety, fear and insecurity.*

The New Testament is also marked with sexual violence. Meredith Warren (again of the Shiloh Project) discusses this with reference to the Apocalypse/Book of Revelation.

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- Written in the first or second century CE, Revelation is widely read as early Christianity's rejection of the sinful, violent Roman Empire and the hopeful expectation of justice for true believers.
- This understanding of the Apocalypse overlooks the rampant violence omnipresent in the text, which depicts sexual violence as a punishment ordained by God. *This reflects the strange world of the Bible where sexual violence and rape were frequently depicted as just punishments for conquered peoples.*
- The defeat of an army represented a power dynamic between enemies, where the victors upheld the masculine role of empowered penetrator and the conquered were made effeminate in their weakness, their penetrability.
- It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that Revelation not only portrays its enemies in feminised terms, but also punishes them with sexual assault.

These biblical #MeToo moments urge us as a Church to do something about sexual violence and violent-supportive systems. And we need to ask ourselves:

- How might we as members of the Christ-body respond to this issue?
- How safe is our Church spaces for our children, women and those who are vulnerable to such acts of violence?
- How might we weave ourselves together in a way that respects and promotes the dignity and humanity of those subjugated by patriarchy?

I am sure you have brilliant answers to these questions, but I invite you all to consider the following:

- pay attention to the facts about sexual abuse because facts do matter (many churches are not very good in appreciating facts)
- listen closely to the stories of sexual abuse victims, because their stories are our stories too, and they must be heard (churches do not have a good record in this matter)

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- radically smash the roots of sexual abuse, because it is vital to the healing process (and churches cannot play safe and be comfortable, because such a church is a danger to society)
- reposition the way we read narratives of abuse in the Bible, because traditional (or the so-called objective, neutral, heaven-bound, divinely-inspired) readings of such texts have become stale and irrelevant.

In addition, we need to call out the complicity of faith communities, particularly those who have

- turned a blind eye to the *violence of scriptures* (biblical and otherwise);
- validated the *sins of the chosen* and the *illusion of patriarchal innocence* (e.g., Noah, Abraham, and Lot) through their *violent-friendly theologies* and *militant readings of scriptures*;
- closed their ears to the *cries of the forgotten/abused* (e.g., Ham, Hagar, Lot's daughters);
- subscribed to, lived by, the toxic values and violent norms of *patriarchy*.

Finally,

- Let us *acknowledge* (and tweet!) that sexual violence in the bible is *troubling* (disturbing/alarming). That requires, on the one hand, a serious reconsideration of the sacred and authoritative status given to the bible, and a critical analysis of norms and values inscribed onto its pages, on the other hand.
- Let us also learn to become *troubling/disruptive* readers; readers who have the radical edge demonstrated by Jesus in his ministry, and the courage to engage, confront, interrogate, resist and, if necessary, shatter any system (like patriarchy) that supports all forms of violence.

In so doing, there is hope to experience life (and healing) in the midst of our weaving!

Leveleva e fakahoha 'a!

Mālō 'aupito!

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