

CONFERENCE REPORT
2023 OCEANIAN PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN DIGNITY CONFERENCE
APRIL 23-25, 2024

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Introduction:

The Oceanian Perspectives on Human Dignity Conference was hosted by the Brigham Young University Hawaii Religious Freedom and Human Dignity (RFHD) Initiative alongside the BYU International Center for Law and Religion Studies (ICLRS) at BYU–Hawaii from April 23 to April 25, 2024. The conference aimed to broaden our understanding of human dignity from various Oceanian viewpoints. Scholars from diverse Oceanian nations were invited to present papers, offering insights into how human dignity is perceived within their respective cultural and societal contexts. The event brought together professionals, scholars, religious leaders, and government officials to explore the intersections of human dignity, religion, and religious freedom in Oceania. Building on the success of previous conferences, such as the one focusing on East Asia, this year's gathering provided a platform for meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas on this crucial topic.

Student Experiences:

Hannah Harding

Attending, presenting at, and helping run the Oceanian Perspectives on Human Dignity conference was an incredible experience. Overall, the conference went smoothly and was well-organized, allowing everyone to focus on the issues that were discussed. It seemed that—as grateful as everyone was for the opportunity to gather and *talanoa* at the conference—everyone left wanting more. The ideas and conversations resonated so deeply that it was no longer enough to just talk, there grew a need to act.

“How will this information get to the people in my village?” asked one delegate. “How can we make sure that we don’t just kick the can further down the road?”

I look forward to seeing what comes from this conference. I think we successfully created a safe space for the most important topics to be discussed and for meaningful relationships to be built. “He tāngata! He tāngata! He tāngata!” is a proverb we heard many times. The most important thing in the world is people, and that is something that the conference reflected. If I were to change anything in the future, it would be to facilitate a better focus on the people, on the relationships built and connections made, and on the actions we will take together moving forward.

Presenting my research on the relationship between governmental restrictions on religious freedom and intrastate conflict was a unique opportunity and a significant growing experience. I was grateful to share my own thoughts about something I care so deeply about and to introduce some of the work we do at BYUH. I was also able to connect with several delegates after the session in relation to my research and am looking forward to carrying the project forward in the future.

Sophia Gunter

Participating in and supporting the Oceanian Perspectives on Human Dignity Conference held at BYU-Hawaii was an incredible opportunity for me to practice applying all of the things I had learned as a fellow for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative. I was able to apply my critical thinking, active listening, and organizational skills to helping the delegates have a wonderful experience. I loved the conference because it provided a platform for leaders in the Pacific to voice their perspectives on what it means to have dignity, to dignify others, or to restore dignity to a person or community. Because BYU-Hawaii's target area includes the Pacific, this was especially applicable to our campus and student body.

One of my favorite responsibilities of the conference was being a driver for delegates to/from the airport, around Laie, and across campus. I loved being able to listen in on the conversations the delegates were having with each other about the things they were learning and hoping to see change in their communities because of what was being shared. I think OPHD was successful in providing a unique space for the delegates to connect with each other and talk about how they could work together in the future.

Although I do not necessarily plan on working in the Pacific in the near future, I think the connections I made with NGO leaders, lawyers, and religious leaders will help prepare me for my professional career. I was particularly impressed by how much relationship there was between human dignity and religious or spiritual themes. This demonstrated to me that concerns for religious freedom and representation are worldwide. Thus, the need for a conference sponsored by the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative and the International Center for Law and Religious Studies was evident to me.

Lindokuhle Mbuli

Attending the OPHD conference was a wonderful experience, which gave me the opportunity to learn about perspectives on human dignity within the Oceania community. Engaging with scholars and delegates from diverse backgrounds broadened my understanding and appreciation of Human Dignity. Moreover, having the opportunity to present my research paper on the viewpoint of BYUH students regarding human dignity was both gratifying and enlightening.

Sharing my findings with delegates, provided me with constructive feedback that will undoubtedly enhance the depth and relevance of my research. It was a fulfilling opportunity to hear from educated scholars and receiving feedback from them at home I can make my own research better.

It is what I have learned in the conference that will better help me understand how I can help the rising generation understand the importance of religious freedom and human dignity and how they can be advocates when they return to their home countries. This experience has and will go a long way.

Riji Levaci

Attending the OPHD (Oceania Pacific Human Dignity) conference has been a transformative experience that has profoundly impacted my perspective on community engagement and human rights advocacy. Throughout the conference, I had the privilege of interacting with passionate delegates from various countries, each driven by a deep commitment to uphold human dignity. Witnessing their fervor and dedication has inspired me to step up and take concrete actions to address pressing issues faced by my community.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my experience was engaging with fellow delegates on a personal level. I had the opportunity to drive delegates around and engage in deep conversations about the challenges and aspirations of our respective communities. These intimate discussions allowed me to gain valuable insights into the shared struggles and aspirations we all face in our pursuit of justice and equality.

The delegates from Fiji, in particular, played a significant role in shaping my perspective. Their heartfelt narratives and firsthand accounts highlighted the urgent need for grassroots initiatives and community-driven solutions. Their stories underscored the importance of returning home to serve our people and effect positive change at the local level.

During the conference, I also had the privilege of presenting my research, which sparked open discussions with leaders from my home country. Their feedback and encouragement to expand my research upon my return have motivated me to delve deeper into the issues that matter most to our community. Overall, my experience at the

OPHD conference has been incredibly rewarding and enlightening. The connections made, the knowledge gained, and the insights shared have left an indelible mark on my journey towards advocating for human dignity and social justice.

Looking ahead, I eagerly anticipate the next conference where I can continue to learn, collaborate, and contribute towards building a more inclusive and rights-respecting society. This experience has reaffirmed my commitment to making a positive impact in my community and beyond.

Vilai Ilolahia

Attending and participating in the Oceania Perspectives on Human Dignity (OPHD) Conference was an unforgettable experience. I had the honor and privilege of meeting esteemed leaders in the Pacific, and meeting them has expanded my view of the world in Oceania. Being in the same room as these delegates gave me a sense of purpose when listening to the presentations and thoughts shared.

It was a fantastic experience to hear from our delegates and connect with them through experiences we share. I had the privilege of being an escort to most of the delegates through the airport runs and hosting them during the breakout sessions throughout the conference. One of my favorite experiences was sharing my love for music and singing with the honorable Ombudsman of Tonga during the breakout session for lunch.

Moreover, it was a fulfilling experience to make friends with delegates in conversation. During the breakout sessions, the guests would often interact with the students and show interest in what the students were invested in to accomplish their academic and career goals. It was also a fun experience to see that student volunteers were able to network and receive business cards from the conference guests. One of the delegates shared their gratitude via a Facebook post on how Brigham Young University Hawaii, despite differences in religion and faith, BYUH still facilitated prayer rooms for other faiths. This experience gave me a stronger appreciation for the respect of different religions and cultures.

Conference Schedule

Wednesday, April 24

- 9:00 - 9:25 AM Opening Session
- 9:30 - 11:00 AM Human Dignity and Faith Traditions in Oceania
- 11:15 - 12:30 AM Tonga and Human Dignity
- 1:30 - 2:45 PM Fiji and Human Dignity
- 3:00 - 4:00 PM Cook Islands, Samoa, and Human Dignity
- 4:00 - 4:30 PM Keynote Speaker

Thursday, April 25

- 9:00 - 9:10 AM Welcome
- 9:10 - 10:30 AM New Zealand and Human Dignity
- 10:45 - 12:00 PM Hawaii and Human Dignity
- 12:00 - 12:30 PM Student Fellows Research
- 1:30 - 2:30 PM Religion, Civil Society, and Human Dignity in Oceania
- 2:45 - 3:45 PM Human Dignity and the Media in Oceania
- 3:45 - 4:30 PM Closing Session

Summary Reports

Opening Session

Introduction:

Academic Vice President Isaiah Walker of Brigham Young University Hawaii welcomed all visiting delegates from various Pacific Island countries outside the U.S. Heading the conference session was Brett G. Scharffs, the Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, opening the conference agenda and commencing the Oceania Perspectives on Human Dignity Conference at Brigham Young University Hawaii.

Isaiah Walker, Welcome Speaker: *Academic Vice President and Professor, Brigham Young University Hawaii, United States*

Vice President Walker expresses his excitement for the commencement of the conference by highlighting that BYU-H comprises several scholars who hail from the Pacific, that he is a scholar in Hawaiian and Pacific history, and that he is excited about the topics of discussion for the conference. Walker states the fittingness of hosting the conference in La'ie, as La'ie has been historically known as a pu'u honua (sanctuary). This place embodies the Hawaiian concept of peace and Aloha (love). He continues his remarks in this notion by telling a brief background of the foundation of BYU-H through the history of La'ie, which continues to be a testament to the sanctuary of La'ie.

Walker tells the significant history of BYU-H, having been announced by President David O McKay of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in 1954. It was ahead of its time because the school and its idea that President McKay had in 1921 was that it was to be an international and racially integrated school while much of American society was still separated under racial segregation. Walker exclaims that 1954 was a significant year for President McKay's vision in 1921 because the year 1954 brought about the famous law case of Brown v. Board of Education, which deemed segregated schools in America unconstitutional.

Isaiah Walker introduces the school's financial program and how it ensures the well-being of student life as they pursue academic success. He also invites the delegates to get to know the students at the conference and how the students are a testament to the validity of the university's mission and vision.

Vice President Walker concludes his remarks by welcoming and thanking all the delegates visiting from their respective countries in the Pacific for their work in preparation for the conference. He exclaims his gratitude that BYU-H can host the conference as their mission and values can resonate with the objectives of the Oceania Perspectives on Human Dignity Conference.

Brett Scharffs, Keynote Speaker: *Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, and Rex E Lee Chair and Professor of Law, J. Reuben Clark School, Brigham Young University, United States.*

Human Dignity & Faith Traditions in Oceania

Introduction:

Delegates from Fiji and Micronesia discussed the interplay between human dignity and faith. Some themes included Pacific Islander connection to the land and ocean, the role of climate change and colonization in stripping Oceanians of their dignity, and the need for the universal application of human dignity.

Hannah Smith, Moderator: *Associate Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University, United States*

Hannah Clayson Smith joined the International Center for Law and Religion Studies as Associate Director in 2023. Hannah brings to ICLRS an unparalleled record of service to religious liberty. As Senior Counsel at Becket Law, she was a member of the legal teams that secured victories in key U.S. Supreme Court religious liberty cases, including *Hosanna-Tabor*

Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC, *Holt v. Hobbs*, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, and *Zubik v. Burwell* (the Little Sisters of the Poor case). She has contributed to over 25 Supreme Court briefs representing more than 13 major faith groups. Smith clerked at the U.S. Supreme Court for Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel A. Alito, Jr. She received her BA from Princeton University, concentrating in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and her JD from BYU Law School, where she graduated Order of the Coif. She served as a full-time French-speaking missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in France and Switzerland. She and her husband John live in Utah with their four wonderful children.

Reverend James Shri Bhagwan: *General Secretary, Pacific Conference of Churches*

Rev. James Shri Bhagwan, born and raised in Fiji, is a dedicated ordained minister of the Methodist Church. He is serving his second term as the General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, where he leads the Oceania region's foremost ecumenical organization consisting of 35 member churches and 11 national councils of churches spanning 20 Pacific Island countries and territories, including Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and Hawai'i. Rev. James holds a Bachelor of Divinity in Ecumenical Studies (with honors) and a Master of Theology in Christian Social Ethics which he obtained from the Methodist Theological University in Seoul, South Korea. His roots trace back to the laborers brought to Fiji under the British indenture system, shaping his commitment to social and ecological justice. He is passionate about coastal and ocean protection, climate justice, and gender issues. He actively

engages in Christian activism, serving as a chaplain, trustee, and volunteer crew member for the Fijian Traditional Voyaging canoe, Uto Ni Yalo. Rev. James' multifaceted contributions extend to his roles as Secretary for Communication and Overseas Mission in the Methodist Church in Fiji and as acting General Secretary of the Fiji Council of Churches. Despite his busy schedule, he aspires to complete his PhD, reflecting his unwavering dedication to faith, justice, and community well-being.

Baghwan shared that human dignity is founded on a needed balance between the health of the body and the health of the spirit. A parallel here exists in the need for a balance between culture and faith. However, Baghwan noted that, in Fiji, this balance became off-skewed and resulted in ethnonationalism instead. He felt that the solution to restoring this balance was to adopt more inclusive policies that would protect and promote human dignity. One aspect of human dignity that Baghwan felt played a significant role in this restoration was creation dignity, or the concept of respect for land, visitors, and community. He shared that the land and the sea are essential parts of Pacific identity and that mana draws Pacific Islanders together. Baghwan talked about the Pacific Household of God, in which Oceanians weave together the praxis of faith and dignity. Challenges to this unity include climate change, colonization, neo-colonization, and militarization.

In response to a question about the humanitarian aspect of human dignity, Baghwan noted that relationships and community indicate a collective responsibility to care for each other. He felt that humanitarian response was one aspect of how human dignity is applied in the Pacific.

Reverend Dr. Peter Loy Chong: *Archdiocese of Suva, Fiji*

Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, pursued theological studies at the Pacific Regional Seminary, culminating in his priesthood ordination in 1992. Throughout his ministry, he served as Parochial Vicar and Parish Priest at various locations, actively engaging in youth ministry and the Worldwide Marriage Encounter Movement. Archbishop Chong furthered his education with post-graduate studies at the Jesuit School of Theology, earning a licentiate and a doctorate in Sacred Theology with a dissertation focused on *Towards a Fijian Contextual Theology: A Catholic Response to Fiji's Coup Culture*. Ordained as the Archbishop of Suva, Fiji, on June 8, 2013, his special theological interests encompass Ecclesiology, Contextual and Liberation Theology, Ecumenism, Interreligious dialogue, and Ecology.

Chong spoke about Pacific Islander human dignity as being grounded to the land and ocean. This innate connection between Oceanian dignity and the environment is violated by climate change impacts that are caused by non-Oceanians. He demonstrated his findings by playing a recording of a song he wrote that expressed the urgency and frustration of this problem. Chong shared that these climate change choices are led by funders and politicians who direct narratives that will increase their own wealth and power. He noted that the problem here is that globalization favors the rich and powerful, and human and planetary dignity don't have a seat at the table.

Chong felt that the bridge between these problems may exist within Catholic social teachings of theo-centrism and community foundations. He noted that the recognition that all people are created in the image of God may encourage globalization to serve human and planetary dignity. His recommendation was a multilateral approach that encouraged globalization from below, which would protect human and planetary dignity. He called this “The Lilliput Strategy.”

Elder Taniela B. Wakolo: *General Authority Seventy & Counselor in the Pacific Area Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Elder Taniela B. Wakolo was sustained as a General Authority Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 1, 2017. At the time of his call, he had been serving as president of the Arkansas Little Rock Mission. He is currently serving as a member of the Pacific Area Presidency. Since joining the Church in 1994, Elder Wakolo has served in numerous callings, including seminary and institute teacher, branch president, high councilor, counselor in a bishopric, counselor in a stake presidency, stake president, president of the Arkansas Little Rock Mission, Area Seventy and president of the Philippines Area. Elder Wakolo studied management and public administration at the University of the South Pacific. In 2007 he received a master’s degree in management from the University of Sunshine Coast, Australia. Elder Wakolo was born in Lomaloma, Lau, Fiji, on June 25, 1967. He married Anita Herberta Moimoi in August 1987. They are the parents of two children.

The theme of Wakolo’s discussion was unity in diversity. He touched upon the fact that there are over 1000 cultures in the Pacific which are influenced by indigenous and global traditions. He spoke much about the perspective of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on human dignity and noted that the Church is founded upon a concept that “true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.” The doctrine that Wakolo focused on in particular was that each human is a child of God, and that human dignity is spelled L-O-V-E. Wakolo shared that Christ is an example of honoring the human dignity of others which he did by healing, loving, and serving all those around him. He pointed to examples in the Pacific of villages coming together to worship as a means of preserving their dignity during difficult times. One village in particular, Sauniatu, had a motto to “Enter to learn, go forth to serve,” which encouraged community members to learn from and serve one each other. Wakolo discussed the many efforts of the Church in the Pacific to serve through humanitarian means. He closed by encouraging the audience to love when love is both expected and unexpected.

In response to a question about the humanitarian aspect of human dignity, Wakolo touched upon the image of a community working together and the implications this type of service had on the way these people viewed and treated each other.

Father Francis X. Hezel: *Society of Jesus, Micronesia*

Francis X. Hezel is a Jesuit priest who has worked in Micronesia for over fifty years. His journey has been marked by diverse roles, including teacher, principal, and director at Xavier High School in Chuuk. For many years, he held the esteemed position as director of Micronesian Seminar, a research-pastoral institute deeply involved in extensive community education initiatives across the Pacific. In his capacity as the director of Micronesian Seminar, Father Hezel played a pivotal role in organizing numerous conferences on pressing issues, facilitating crucial dialogues that addressed social change and its profound impact on island societies. He has also published over a hundred articles and eleven books on Micronesian history and culture, including *The First Taint of Civilization* and *Strangers in Their Own Land*. He produced over 70 video documentaries for local broadcast, including a seven-hour series on the history of Micronesia.

Hezel offered a few statements for consideration of how we honor human dignity. He said that it is easy to make a document about human dignity, but harder to apply it to life; it is easy to set-up individuals as icons who deserve respect, but harder to honor the dignity of everyone. Hezel's was particularly focused on the universality of human dignity, he shared that "if human dignity is not universal, then it is useless." To him, this universality has a connection to faith in the way that churches reach out to touch the hearts of people. He felt that the role of churches wasn't to baptize, but rather to reach out to people. Hezel shared that he believes that no one is fully secular, and that all have the capacity for faith. In the 1960's, he saw a shift in the Pacific towards inclusivity rather than a practice of defining people by their faith. In this example, Hezel shared that when we set out to teach faith, we find that are really learners, and this learning is something we can practice by serving others.

In response to a question about the humanitarian aspect of human dignity, Hezel shared that he sees an excess of individualism in our modern society. He felt that humanitarian care was one way to combat this excess and restore the community balance.

Tonga and Human Dignity

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the concept and application of Human Dignity from the Tongan perspective, as well as the barriers to its application.

Dr. Tēvita O. Ka’ili, Moderator: *Professor of Anthropology, BYU–Hawaii*

Honorable Linda Folaumoetu’i: *Attorney General, Kingdom of Tonga*

The four golden pillars of Tongan culture act as the foundation to the Tongan understanding of Human Dignity: *faka’apa’apa* (respect), *loto to* (humility), *tauhi va* (nurturing relationships), and *mamahi’i me’a* (loyalty/passion). Although most of the rights found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are reflected in Tonga’s 1875 Constitution, not all rights are protected in reality, depending on an individual’s race, gender, religion, status, etc. A few issues today include the death penalty, the use of whipping, and a lack of legislation protecting privacy. “How do I uphold international standards and respect my culture at the same time?” asks Folaumoetu’i. The key to reconciling these competing values is a balance in both worlds through a *talanoa* process, striving for the Tongan forefathers’ vision of equality, and changes in legislation.

Dr. Mele Tupou-Vaitohi: *Senior Lecturer, Law Faculty, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

Dr. Tupou-Vaitohi explored the concept of Human Dignity in terms of equity, belonging, and power and discussed a major project to improve individuals’ from the Pacific access to law school in New Zealand and professions in law. Currently, people with Pacific ancestry are overrepresented in the New Zealand criminal justice systems. They face many barriers to attending law school, including conflicting cultural values, inequitable starting points, and a lack of feeling of belonging. From this lens, Human Dignity requires equity, creating a level playing field and a culture of belonging so all feel safe. This project aims to contribute to a New Zealand that is just, inclusive, tolerant, and free, where all understand the role and value of the law and enjoy the protection it provides.

Honorable Alisi Taumoepeau: *Ombudsman, former Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Tonga*

Human Dignity means that when we lose everything, we keep moving forward, like the young child who searched for her school bag after losing her home to a tsunami. Although reality is far from “unity in diversity,” Tonga can move forward and say, like the child, “We’re good, we see the challenges; we’ll move forward and do better tomorrow than what we have done today.” The Ombudsman organization in Tonga hears and investigates complaints against government administration and public service, helping public servants give people the dignity they deserve to be heard and understood.

Fiji and Human Dignity

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the concept and application of Human Dignity from the Fijian perspective, as well as the barriers to its application and also provided insights and recommendation that could better promote human dignity in the country.

David Whippy: *Director of the David O. McKay Center for Intercultural Understanding, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Culture, Language and Performing Arts.*

Speakers:

Suliana Taukei: *Principle Legal Officer and Chairperson of the Human Rights Committee, Office of the Attorney General, Fiji.*

Miss Suliana discussed achievements, challenges, and future strategies to promote and protect human rights in Fiji. She highlighted Fiji's commitment to recognizing and safeguarding human rights, celebrated its leadership role in advancing human rights in the region, and outlined significant efforts undertaken to uphold human rights within the country. Miss Suliana identified several key strategies to enhance human rights protection in Fiji, including human rights training and awareness programs and capacity building initiatives. Collaboration with international development partners was also emphasized as crucial for advancing human rights in Fiji.

Dr. Natasha Khan: *Ph.D., Lecturer and Coordinator, Leadership, Governance and Human Rights, The University of the South Pacific.*

The Indo-Fijian community faces several challenges that intersect with human rights concerns. These challenges include gender-based violence, land security, and political insecurity. To advance human rights in Fiji, it's necessary to foster a deeper understanding of rights and responsibilities. This includes promoting open discussions on the reciprocal nature of rights and the importance of respecting individual freedoms while upholding societal duties.

Loukinikini Lewaravu: *Director, Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, Fiji*

In Fiji, human dignity is rooted in cultural values and traditions. To promote human rights effectively, it is essential to converse with communities in their local languages. Key strategies for community engagement include cultural sensitivity, collaborating with leaders and elders, organizing interactive workshops and storytelling sessions, and providing materials in local languages. Empowering communities to advocate for their rights fosters a culture of respect, dignity, and social justice.

Cook Islands, Samoa, and Human Dignity

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the concept and application of Human Dignity from the Cook Islands and Samoan perspective, as well as the barriers to its application.

Moderator: Moana Numanga, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Business and Government, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, United States

Speakers:

Honourable Tamatoa Jonassen, Secretary, Ministry of Justice, Cook Islands

Honorable Tamatoa Jonassen, Secretary of the Ministry of Justice in the Cook Islands, offered insights into the unique challenges of identity and perception in the island nation. He metaphorically described the struggle of "fitting in a box" on a diamond-shaped island, suggesting the complexities of identity within a confined space. Additionally, Jonassen referenced a poem by Eleanor Roosevelt, likely to emphasize the importance of individuality and self-expression amidst societal expectations. Highlighting demographic statistics, he noted the disparity between Cook Islands' population of 15,000 and the larger diaspora in New Zealand and Australia, indicating the widespread influence of Cook Islanders globally. Furthermore, Jonassen mentioned the cultural significance of prayer in government meetings, reflecting the intertwining of faith and governance in Cook Islands' society. Lastly, he touched on the theme of perception, acknowledging the tendency to misinterpret people or situations, underscoring the importance of understanding beyond surface impressions. Through these points, Jonassen conveyed the intricacies of identity, community, and perception within the context of Cook Islands.

Honorable Maualaivao Pepe Seiuli, Acting Ombudsman, Samoa

Honorable Maualaivao Pepe Seiuli, Acting Ombudsman of Samoa, outlined the significance of human dignity within Samoa's cultural and legal framework. With a population of 205,550 people, Seiuli emphasized that dignity, defined as the state of being worthy of honor and respect, is fundamental to every individual's humanity. He highlighted its pivotal role in upholding human rights, underscoring its importance in Samoa's societal fabric. Notably, Seiuli stressed that human dignity should be not only applicable but also suitable for all members of the community, a principle enshrined in both the Ombudsman's mandate and the constitution. In his role as the ombudsman, Seiuli has become a key advocate for human rights protection in Samoa. Regarding parenting, Seiuli asserted that while discipline is still culturally acceptable, it should not infringe upon children's human rights. Children are taught that their rights serve to protect them rather than empower them to disrespect their parents. Furthermore, Seiuli addressed the issue of gender-based violence against women, attributing it partly to women's lack of awareness regarding available resources. Through these points, Seiuli underscored the importance of human

dignity as a guiding principle in Samoa's legal, cultural, and social spheres, advocating for its protection and promotion at all levels of society.

Keynote Speaker

Honorable Robert J. Torres, *Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Guam*

Judge Torres' speech delves into a critical aspect of American legal history: the unequal treatment of territories and their residents under the Constitution. The backdrop for this discussion lies in the infamous Insular Cases of 1901. These cases represent a pivotal moment where the U.S. Supreme Court established a legal framework that classified territories into two categories: incorporated and unincorporated. This classification had far-reaching implications, particularly for territories like Guam.

Guam finds itself in a unique and paradoxical position, characterized by Judge Torres as the "Domestic type of Foreign." This phrase encapsulates the complex reality where Guam is treated as part of the United States, yet its residents are denied the full spectrum of constitutional rights enjoyed by citizens residing in the fifty states.

The ramifications of this classification are profound, touching upon virtually every aspect of the lives of those who call territories like Guam home. From fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and due process to more practical considerations like voting rights and representation in Congress, the absence of equal constitutional protections casts a long shadow over the lives of territorial residents.

The concept of being a "Domestic type of Foreign" underscores the inherent contradiction in the status of territories like Guam. While they are geographically and politically integrated into the United States, their legal status relegates them to second-tier citizenship, where the promise of equal protection under the law remains elusive.

Judge Torres' poignant remarks serve as a call to action, highlighting the urgent need to reexamine and rectify the disparities that persist within the American legal framework. It is a reminder that the principles of equality and justice must extend beyond the borders of the fifty states to encompass all those who look to the United States for guidance and protection.

New Zealand and Human Dignity

Introduction:

The speakers enthusiastically discuss the importance of upholding the human dignity of the indigenous people especially the Maoris. In addition, they raised alarming issues in New Zealand and proposed means to address them. Dr. Daniel boldly stated that there is a need to be compassionate but still have a firm stance toward human dignity, especially when threatened. She mentioned that even now, human dignity is still at risk because of colonization, sexism, and capitalism and suggested the need to prioritize the issue and call their fellow Oceanians to action. Dr. Hemi shed light on the issues in New Zealand, such as blackbirding, cutting budgets, and the legislative policies that could undermine the rights of the people and calls to expand resources. Lastly, Mrs. Matenga added that the rights of Indigenous people are necessary and that there is a need to practice unity to better resolve the issues at hand in New Zealand.

Moderator: Honorable Matt Salmon: *Former U.S. Congressman from Arizona, Former member of Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, and Special Advisor to the President of Arizona State University for International Affairs, United States*

Speakers

Dr. Jenny Te Paa Daniel, Ph.D., Acting Director, National Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Otago, New Zealand

The speaker discussed the importance of justice and upholding a compassionate yet firm stance on human dignity. She pointed out that justice is inevitable, and colonizers continuously challenge to attain justice, especially for Indigenous people. In addition, Dr. Te Paa Daniel mentioned how honoring our ancestors and their legacies is essential and that dignity starts from communal spaces. For instance, when she was a child, she was taught never to trample anyone's dignity. Challenges in terms of human dignity are not new to every Maori because of colonization, sexism, and capitalism they experienced in the past, and it is still a threat to their existence. She suggested that we need to continue to show compassion for human suffering and that we need to "moderate our stance where necessary by righteous anger, passive resistance, and measured political action," which will allow us to be firm in upholding dignity for all. There is a need to prioritize human dignity and learn when to resist when threatened. Lastly, she boldly emphasized that we are part of the Oceanian and are intertwined genealogically and spiritually.

Dr. Keakaokawai Varner Hemi, Ph.D., Assistant Vice Chancellor, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Dr. Hemi argues that there is a need for a reality check on human rights in New Zealand due to the different issues that the country is facing. Some of them are the lack of support in the Maori language and cutting budgets on projects that address discrimination that undermines the human dignity of the people. She raises the issue of blackbirding, where people are being enslaved in Australia. Also, she highlighted the resilience of the Pacific people and their role in the community. Additionally, education is vital in preserving their culture and identity. As part of

their reality check, New Zealand should check on how they are genuinely committed to the treaties regarding international human rights and the legal support they provide. The threats to human rights arose from the legislative changes, and she suggested that there is a need to expand the resources to uphold human dignity and eradicate discrimination in New Zealand.

Jennae Matenga, Senior Solicitor, Burgess Law, New Zealand

Mrs. Matenga is a lawyer who is highly involved in the Waitangi Tribunal. The speaker delves into the importance of upholding the human dignity and rights of the Indigenous Maori through the lens of the legal framework. Also, the concept of Kotahitanga, unity or solidarity, was highly discussed. The Treaty of Waitangi was created to protect and promote the community's principles. A supreme court case, *Takamore v. Clarke*, emphasizes that cultural identity is integral to human dignity. Various acts and the Human Rights Commission were established as part of an effort to uphold human dignity. However, there were challenges, such as the government's policies, which could harm the dignity and rights of the Indigenous people. For that reason, Kotohitanga is vital between the government and the Maori. Mrs. Matenga firmly advocates for education and unity to address the current challenges in New Zealand.

Hawaii and Human Dignity

Moderator: Aaron Shumway, *Director & Associate Professor in the Faculty of Religious Education*

The panel, "Hawaii and Human Dignity," provided a thought-provoking exploration into the profound connection between human dignity, ancestral heritage, and the land in Hawaii. The insights shared by the speakers shed light on the intricate web of cultural, spiritual, and legal dimensions that shaped the concept of dignity in the Hawaiian context.

Dr. Alohalani Kaluhiokalani Housman, *Ph.D., Dean & Associate Professor, Faculty of Culture, Language, and Performing Arts & Jonathan Napela Center for Hawaiian & Pacific Studies, BYU-Hawaii*

Alohalani Houseman eloquently captured the essence of human dignity in Hawaii by emphasizing its deep-rooted connection to ancestors and the land. She underscored the significance of lineage and place, noting that many narratives in Hawaiian tradition began with reverence for one's forebears and the sacred land upon which their stories unfolded. In doing so, Houseman highlighted the interdependence between human identity, cultural heritage, and the natural environment in shaping notions of dignity.

Dr. Gregg J. Kinkley, Ph.D., *Former Deputy Attorney General & Lecturer of Religion and Classics at University of Hawaii, United States*

Gregg Kinkley's invocation for blessings on the room and the earth set a tone of reverence and respect, reflecting a holistic worldview that extended beyond human concerns to encompass the

well-being of the entire planet. His reflections on the adversarial nature of rights discourse in the Western legal tradition offered a sobering perspective on the limitations of confrontational approaches to justice. Kinkley's comparison between Hawaii and Hebrew society underscored the profound spiritual underpinnings that underlay both cultures, emphasizing their shared reverence for the land as a source of sustenance and spiritual nourishment.

Jaimee Macanas Neel, *Senior Advisor, Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. State Department & BYU-Hawaii*

Jaimee Neel's remarks on religious freedom added another dimension to the discussion, suggesting a correlation between the degree of religious liberty in a society and its levels of prosperity, equality, and respect for human rights. Neel's observation invited reflection on the role of spirituality and cultural expression in fostering a climate of tolerance, acceptance, and respect for diversity, thereby nurturing the dignity of all individuals within a community.

Student Panel

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the concept and application of Human Dignity from the Tongan perspective, as well as the barriers to its application.

John Zenger, Moderator: *Student Lead for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative, Brigham Young University - Hawaii, United States*

John West Zenger was raised on a small hobby farm in rural Idaho, USA. With both parents as university professors, academic curiosity was instilled in him at a young age. After graduating from high school, John spent some time serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Washington, DC. Following his mission, he attended BYU–Hawaii to study music and composition, where he discovered his passion for

Intercultural Peacebuilding and Law. John currently serves as the Student Lead for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative at BYUH and is a fellow at the J. Reuben Clark Law Society. He graduated summa cum laude from BYU–Hawaii in April 2024 with a BA in Intercultural Peacebuilding and Music. He looks forward to pursuing his JD as a candidate in 2027.

Riji Levaci: *Student Fellow for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative, Brigham Young University - Hawaii, Fiji*

Nameha Raiwalui: *Student at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, Fiji*

Levaci and Raiwalui shared their research done on the evaluation of the perceptions and feelings of various Fijian community members about the potential introduction of Christianity. The goal

of their research was to understand how open and accepting Fijians may be of various religions. They found that most respondents felt open to the idea of accepting Christianity. They hope to further their research by evaluating the feelings of Fijian communities to the acceptance of other minority religions including Hinduism and Islam.

Lindokuhle Mbuli: *Assistant Student Lead for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative, Brigham Young University - Hawaii, Eswatini*

Mbuli's research was a study on how students at Brigham Young University-Hawaii understand human dignity. The results of his study found that the many countries represented on campus also represented the diversity of opinion of what human dignity is and how it should be applied. Common themes included respect and understanding culture.

Vilai Ilolahia: *Student Fellow for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative, Brigham Young University - Hawaii, Tonga*

Ilohahia spoke about his own personal lens on religious freedom and its connection to gender equality. He shared that he had failed his mathematics tests in high school so he ended up spending much more time in the civil society sector than he had originally hoped. This introduced him to the idea of gender equality. In his literature review, Ilolahi found an emphasis of community and equality as essential tenets of gender equality in the Pacific.

Hannah Harding: *Student Fellow for the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative, Brigham Young University - Hawaii, United States*

Harding's research centered on the connection between restrictions on religious freedom and conflict. Her research was founded on Volkan's theory of group regression. This theory suggests that conflict will increase when a group feels that their identity is under threat. Her research was limited to 2008-2010 in Fiji and she found that there was a correlation between increasing government restrictions and increased intrastate conflict during that time period.

Johann Faana-Kong: *Student at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, French Polynesia*

Faana-Kong's research was an evaluation of religious diversity and how it relates to political stability. He found that the greater rates of religious diversity also had the highest rates of political stability. Some of the reasons for this that he found during his research were that religious diversity improves social cohesion, increases trust, and promotes tolerance.

Religion, Civil Society, and Human Dignity in Oceania

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the role of civil society in protecting Human Dignity and the relationship between the environment and Human Dignity.

Dr. Rand Blimes, Moderator: *Professor of Political Science, BYU–Hawaii*

Mena Antonio: *Chief Executive/Kaiwhakahaere Mātua, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand*

Caritas is Latin for charity and means love in action. Small, local groups are the ones that make the biggest difference, although the New Zealand government should still be held accountable. Human dignity says that each human is created in God’s image, and each one reflects a bit of Him, but we alone are not complete. Global warming is a critical issue in Oceania, and taking care of the environment is an essential part of protecting Human Dignity. A river can be the heart of a village, their home, fridge, teacher, counselor and friend, all in one. It can have the same rights as a person, as can whales. The natural world is integrated into who we are, its wellbeing is essential to the human dignity of us all. “We are the ocean, the ocean is us,” says Mena Antonio. She asks what legal personhood afforded to the Pacific Ocean might look like. Would we respond differently to the violations happening now, such as deep-sea mining, floating garbage, and radioactive water being dumped into the ocean? We must “engage, listen, and commune” with those who are affected by global warming.

Reverend Siotame Drew Havea: *Board Chairman, Civil Society Forum of Tonga*

Human Dignity comes from one being created in the image of God, but which of us holds the image of God? Is it only the rich, well-connected, and powerful? Anyone and everyone—whether they be minorities, poor, or sex workers—no matter how they may differ from us, all hold the image of God. We must invest resources to build a culture of Human Dignity in communities, not only addressing the issues at the top of donors’ lists but the root of what Human Dignity is and what it would take to fully embrace the humanity of others.

Some UN Agencies and other Civil Society Organizations are not adequately protecting the Human Dignity of those they are trying to help. Other programs help greatly, like the one that provided weaving material to women affected by a Tsunami, who were then able to naturally talk about their experiences and find healing. Some things need to be challenged; others strengthened. Overall, however, communities are not paying enough attention to things such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child; not all UN Conventions have been ratified. Human Dignity also calls for fair and sustainable economic systems and for institutions that allow voices to be heard and included in important decisions, such as the militarization of the Pacific Ocean through nuclear submarines. Human dignity exists when there is “just peace.”

Human Dignity and the Media

Introduction:

Speakers discussed the concept and application of Human Dignity from the Tongan perspective, as well as the barriers to its application.

Moderator: Dr. Brent Cowley, Ph.D., Visiting Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Letters, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, United States

Speakers: Nemani Delaibatiki, Former editor of Fiji Sun and Fiji Daily Post, Fiji

Nemani Delaibatiki, former editor of Fiji Sun and Fiji Daily Post, provided valuable insights into the role of media in democracy. Delaibatiki emphasized that the media's is a pillar of democracy, serving to inform, educate, and entertain the public. He drew attention to the symbiotic relationship between government and the press, likening a newspaper's absence to a government without a voice. Delaibatiki stressed the importance of fairness, accuracy, and balanced reporting, asserting that all stories must present multiple perspectives. He acknowledged the challenges posed by social media, noting its unbounded nature and its potential for malicious content. However, Delaibatiki highlighted the positive impact of social media when used appropriately, contributing to societal prosperity. He underscored that media freedom entails responsibility and accountability, particularly for those in positions of power who have a moral obligation to foster a free and transparent community. Delaibatiki also addressed the inequality within the media landscape, advocating for a leveled playing field that includes support for the disadvantaged. Furthermore, he spoke to the transformative power of affirmative action in improving lives. Delaibatiki concluded by emphasizing the media's role in providing an equal platform for all individuals and urged politicians and leaders to lead by example in respecting the media's autonomy and integrity.

Ramanlal Vallabh, Owner and Reporter, 88.6 FM Radio Nuku'alofa, Tonga

Ramanlal Vallabh, Owner and Reporter at 88.6 FM Radio Nuku'alofa in Tonga, addressed the intersection of human dignity and the media in Oceania. He began by highlighting the foundational principles laid out in the Tongan Constitution, which enshrines the rights to freedom of speech and press freedom, ensuring that all Tongans are entitled to dignity and rights. Vallabh stressed the importance of accuracy, fairness, and balance in media reporting, emphasizing the need to avoid intimidation, harassment, and invasion of privacy. He also underscored the significance of upholding cultural values in media practices. Vallabh noted that once a matter becomes public, additional comments are inevitable, but he cautioned against deviating from the core issue and engaging in personal attacks, which contradicts ethical standards. Furthermore, he mentioned the existence of legislation penalizing the dissemination of defamatory content. Finally, Vallabh wryly remarked on the paradox of media consumption, suggesting that while ignorance results from not reading newspapers, misinformation can arise from doing so. Through these points, Vallabh underscored the importance of responsible and ethical journalism in upholding human dignity, fostering informed discourse, and respecting individual rights in the media landscape of Oceania.

Closing Session

During the closing session of the conference, participants reflected on the discussions held and pondered the next steps in advancing human rights within Pacific. Key insights and commitments emerged from distinguished speakers, setting a roadmap for action at local and grassroots levels.

Question Posed: Where do we go from here?

Archbishop Chong's Call for Local Engagement

Archbishop Chong emphasized the importance of bringing the momentum of this conference to a more localized level. He underscored the need to shift from top-down approaches to grassroots engagement, advocating for dialogue and advocacy within communities. He proposed engaging with the Pacific Islands Forum to amplify the voices and actions for human rights across the region.

Loukinikini's Commitment to Grassroots Initiatives

Loukinikini expressed her commitment to taking human rights initiatives down to the grassroots level. She highlighted ongoing discussions with her team to initiate community-focused programs that promote awareness and empower individuals at the local level. This approach aims to catalyze change from within communities, ensuring relevance and sustainability.

Gratitude and Commitment to Continued Conversations

Several participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations during the conference. They acknowledged the importance of dialogue and collaboration in advancing human rights, affirming their commitment to continue advocating and working towards a more inclusive and rights-respecting society in the Pacific.

Closing Remarks: Director Brett Scharffs:

Upon the conclusion of the conference, the participants were inspired to uphold the values of unity and love in their advocacy for human rights. The focus was on fostering continued collaboration and solidarity at all levels, from local communities to international platforms.

The attendees were encouraged to work together towards promoting human rights, and to that end, they pledged their support to maintain cooperation and support across all levels. The spirit of togetherness was emphasized and it was agreed that continued advocacy in support of human rights would be a collaborative effort.

The conference aimed to motivate attendees to work towards a common goal of promoting human rights, and it was felt that the spirit of unity and love was essential to this end. The

participants were urged to continue advocating for human rights with the knowledge that they had the support of a community of like-minded individuals who shared their passion and commitment.

In closing, he quoted on the following religious leaders:

Spiritual Insights

James Bhagwan's poignant remarks on the depth of spirituality in the Pacific resonated deeply with participants. He emphasized the importance of engaging in profound listening and sharing within communities, fostering empathy and understanding rooted in cultural and spiritual richness.

Elder Wakolo's Wisdom

Elder Wakolo's insightful perspective on human dignity as embodied in love left a lasting impression. Love, as defined by Elder Wakolo, is the real spelling of Human Dignity.