

The worship life of the Tongan people

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Based on the teachings of the Bible there is much that Tongan Christians share in common with other Christians.. Yet, there are some unique elements of Tongan spirituality and worship that are worthy of notice. Since Christianity arrived in Tonga in the early 18th century, church and worship became a central feature of the Tongan way of life. The monarchy encouraged the development of Christianity's place in Tongan and it is now an integral part of Tongan identity. Education was also greatly supported by the church and this has also been a factor it's influence on the values of Tongan society. The church became the community and the community the church. Culturally, church or worship is to be guarded with respect and dignity.

Tongan spirituality has a long and close connection with Methodist spirituality. Meetings are quite regular and demanding. Sunday is treated as a holy day to be spent in religious practices. There are also weekly prayer meetings choir practices and bible studies. Regular participation is expected and people show a huge enormous commitment to supporting the activities of their church. Often the whole family will be in church for several hours to show loyalty and support of these programs.

In Tongan society a hierarchy exists from Monarchy, nobility to commoners. In a sense there is also a hierarchy reflected also in the church and family for example, respect for ministers and church leaders; respect for parents and respect for the elderly in the community. Male dominance is the norm.

Prior to the coming of Christianity there was a tradition where there were tributes offered to chiefs at special events. This giving was harnessed by the church as they encouraged people to give generously even if that meant taking loans. The collection of money is often very public, celebratory events with the amounts that families give announced. There is a noticeable generosity in Tongan Christianity.

For Tongans there are certain events in the church calendar that are very significant.

1. The first week of every year is **Uike Lotu** *a week of prayer*. Tongan churches will gather every morning and evening each day for prayer and devotion followed by a big feast. Families and individuals will offer to host a dinner as a sacrifice made on behalf of God. There will be speeches from different people at the breakfast and dinner that often goes for hours as part of the worship and celebration.
2. **Toetu'u** - *Easter weekend* is another time of the year that Tongan people use in special ways. Often Easter Camps are held that have a focus on families. It is a time of strict reflection and spiritual checking. The whole three days will be full with programs that include worship, teaching, sporting and feasting.

3. **Katoanga Misinale** is Stewardship or Mission Giving Sunday held on a Saturday in October, November or December is a Tongan church tradition where individuals or families make their one time financial offering toward the work of the church. A long tradition of lump sum giving is made as a token of ones' love for God. Thousands of dollars may be collected in one day. Again this will be celebrated with a feasting after.
4. **Po Le'o** New Years Eve is a special day that Tongans have used as part of their worship and celebration. Throughout the day there will be special feasting as part of the thanksgiving offering to God for the whole year of journey. On the night beginning at 10:00pm until 12:00am, **a night watch service** with several speakers leading the community of faith into the New Year.

These special days played a very important part in the worship life and religious celebration of Tongan people. Until one is part of these religious calendars of the year, Tongan spirituality may be seen as incomplete.

Tongan people have a warm heart toward God. As much as they love singing in harmony and celebrative feasting, they will strive to make worship a priority as a reverence for God.