Introduction

Oceania is sometimes referred to as the ‘liquid continent’. Encompassing over 42 million people speaking over 5,000 languages across 14 countries and spanning 8.5 million square kilometres, it is difficult to talk uniformly about matters of religion or masculinity in the region. Statistical comparisons carry little weight for a number of reasons, including the small size of many Oceania nations and the dominance of the two largest countries in the region, Australia and New Zealand. Further, broad patterns of religious development impacting the Pacific Islands such as Fiji, Samoa and Tonga have little to no impact in the cities of Melbourne, Perth or Dunedin. One must think creatively to seek to distil the concepts of masculinity and religion into a cohesive and substantive discussion of developments on such a broad scale. This chapter proposes to do so through an analysis of the intersection of religion, masculinity and sport; specifically, rugby union, known colloquially as the ‘game they play in heaven’, and rugby league.

Rugby playing fields, clubrooms and boardrooms are arguably the key site of interaction between men (and increasingly women) of the constituent nations of Oceania. It due to the popularity of rugby both as a sport and a pathway out of poverty for many families across Oceania that young Pacific Islander men have come to occupy highly paid professional roles in New Zealand and Australian Rugby Union and Rugby League clubs and national teams (and in doing so, in effect stripping home nations of talent in a form of modern ‘rugby colonisation’).

At the professional and club levels, the intersection of religion and masculinity is powerful. Prayer circles consisting of primarily Pacific Island players are conducted before or after games. Players sporting crucifix and biblical verse tattoos score tries and point to the heavens in celebration, whilst those awarded man of the match honours thank God in post-match interviews. Players sing hymns in the team bus, airplanes and dressing rooms, whilst entire stadiums of Pacific Island national rugby teams sing hymns in support of their team throughout the duration of games. In deeply secular nations such as Australia (the largest nation and economic market in Oceania) and New Zealand, this is typically celebrated or at least tolerated, as such displays of Pacific Island evangelical Christian belief are typically associated with winning and thus, it might be argued, national masculine pride.

However, one recent incident involving the Australian Wallabies fullback, Israel Folau (of Tongan heritage) in particular, brought the tolerance for public displays of religion by Pacific
Island rugby players to a head, demonstrating broader tensions and divisions between evangelical Christianity and the public displays of religion that form the base of life in the Pacific Islands, and secular Australia driven by neoliberal economic imperatives. The posting of religiously inspired anti-homosexual Twitter messages would not only result in the sacking of arguably the best player in the national team, due in no small part to the abandonment of sponsors, but would become the key case central to the development of freedom of religion legislation in Australia.

Drawing on Connell’s notion of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (Connell 2005:77) and my own work with Possamai on ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (Roose and Possamai 2015), this chapter draws on the Folau sacking to provide deep insights into the intersection of religion and masculinity in the Oceanian context.

**Masculinities as frame**

It is important to anchor the chapter in the specific understanding of masculinities that will shape the analysis. The study of men and masculinities has expanded rapidly in past decades, in particular across the social sciences, the humanities and biological sciences (Connell, Hearn and Kimmel 2005:1).

Masculinity is understood here as the social construction of what it is to ‘be a man’ (Kimmel and Bridges 2011). Whilst there are numerous theoretical formulations that assist in delving into the relationship between the ‘social’, power and manhood, Connell’s body of scholarship is arguably the ‘central reference point for many, if not most, writers on men and masculinity’ (Wetherell and Edley 1998:156). In outlining the fluid nature of masculinity, Connell notes:

> There is abundant evidence that masculinities are multiple, with internal complexities and even contradictions; also, that masculinities change in history, and that women have a considerable role in making them, in interaction with boys and men.  

*(Connell 2015)*

McDowell makes the further important observation that class and ethnicity combine as a major factor in the social construction of masculinities, ‘interacting with gender and generation to produce varied and unequally valued positionalities, which in themselves are both complex and fluid’ (McDowell 2003:12). Connell’s 2005 book *Masculinities* is a key text, expositing the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Drawn from the Gramscian analysis of class relations, referring to the ‘cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life’, the concept explores how at any one point in time, ‘one form of masculinity is culturally exalted’ (2005:77). Connell states:

> Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

*(ibid.)*

The concept has been critiqued, primarily by gender studies theorists on a number of fronts, including the apparent contradiction of a minority of men who do not necessarily embody ‘hegemonic’ masculinity, such as muscular bodily disposition, yet remain powerful, and that it is heteronormative, thus contributing to the further marginalisation of LGBTIQ voices. In a
re-evaluation of the text 10 years after its publication, Connell and Messerschmitt explain the difference between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it.

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832)

Connell’s work provides an important frame for engaging with how subordinated status shapes social behaviour and political action and proves particularly valuable in understanding the controversy surrounding the Israel Folau Twitter posts and his subsequent sacking. The relationship between colonisation, subordination, religion and masculinity is particularly pronounced in the Oceanian context.

**History of colonisation in Oceania**

In seeking to understand masculinity and religion (and the role of rugby) in such a geographically and culturally diverse region, it is important to take stock of the history of Oceania and its colonisation by the European powers over several hundred years. Oceania consists of 14 nations from the continent of Australia, with a population of approximately 25 million, to Nauru, with a population of just 11,000 (United Nations 2019). The geographic region includes Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Oceania extends from Papua New Guinea and the Marshall Islands in the north, to the Pitcairn Islands (UK) and French Polynesia in the east, New Zealand to the south and Australia to the west. The majority of nations lay to the east of Australia and north of New Zealand, surrounded by a vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The diversity of nations and their spread makes it difficult to talk of a specific period of settlement by Indigenous populations. Estimates based on evidence suggest a range from over 60,000 years ago in the case of Indigenous Australians to 5,000 years ago in Fiji and as recently as 700 years in the case of the Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand).

In contrast to these deep roots, European exploration commenced in the 16th century, with efforts to colonise in earnest from the 18th century. European power politics of the time saw Oceania, like Africa, carved into spheres of control and influence between the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States, with the position of ports and supply routes in a vast expanse of ocean vital. Resistance to colonisation by Indigenous peoples in Oceania was significant, from the Frontier Wars (1788–1934) between Aboriginal Australians and settlers (including the Black War from the mid-1820s to 1832, resulting in the genocide of Tasmanian Aboriginals) and the New Zealand wars (1845–1872) to the resistance by Fijian King Apolosi Nawai and the Viti Kabani (1913–1917) and the non-violent Mau movement in Samoa (1920s–1930s). However, it may be surmised that the Indigenous of each country never truly recovered from the population decimation brought about by exposure to diseases to which locals had no immunity, contributing to a deep-seated vulnerability and reliance on the coloniser. This was due in particular to the disproportionate impact on local leadership, who were more likely to be exposed to disease through engagement with those visiting or returning to the Pacific Islands. Over the period 1875–1876, one third of the population of Fiji (approximately 40,000) were killed by measles, with ‘all or nearly all’ of the island’s 69 chiefs dying ‘at a critical moment in Fijian history’ (Shanks 2016:72) just months after the British annexation. In the absence of any local resistance from chiefs, the British governor of Fiji, Sir
Arthur Gordon (who had previously governed Trinidad and Mauritius), would bring in indentured labourers from India to fill the shortage of males to ostensibly protect the just-measles-ravaged Indigenous Fijians from plantation life (Durgahee 2017:71). This was a development that, as outlined later, has resulted in tensions evident to the current era. In 1918 the global influenza pandemic reached Fiji, Tonga and Samoa and was particularly lethal. In Samoa, 30 per cent of the adult men and 22 per cent of the adult women died, an event that ‘rapidly altered wholesale family and political structures’ (Tomkins 1992:181). Shanks notes the extent of the impact of introduced illnesses across Oceania:

Of the many disasters which could happen to an isolated island society, sudden loss of its leadership had the most profound effects. Such a loss could initiate an armed struggle for the succession with a resulting civil war. In pre-literate societies the death of leaders prior to their ability to pass on oral traditions meant that much culturally significant information was irretrievably lost. Coupled with the loss of many ordinary members of society during an epidemic, leadership loss destabilised and demoralised island populations, creating fragile organisations incapable of resisting outside pressure for change.

(Shanks 2016:73)

The impacts of such change and colonisation continue to be felt to the present day. In her work on American Samoa, Sailiata coined the term ‘Polynesian Primitivism’ to ‘explain the ways a hegemonic project of knowledge, science and culture continues to be mapped upon bodies and Islands in Oceania’ (2014:19).

Beyond the colonisation of Indigenous peoples, the introduction of Western agricultural methods to Oceania, including plantations, created a need for a cheap and compliant workforce. In 1847 it was revealed that Scottish colonist Benjamin Boyd had procured 65 Melanesian labourers to work his land in New South Wales, with subsequent boatloads arriving in the years after. Labourers, primarily from Fiji and the Solomon Islands, were deceived or coerced into providing their labour at little or no cost. This commenced systematically in the northern Australian state of Queensland in the early 1860s and continued until 1908. Approximately 60,000 ‘Kanakas’ were brought to Australia in a process known as ‘blackbirding’ (now referred to as ‘indentured labour’). The Pacific Islands were mined of their working-age men for several generations by Australians, Europeans, Chileans and even Peruvians.

Reparations for blackbirding practices remain to be paid, despite demands, and indeed, unlikely ever will. By contrast, in November 2019, the Queensland government settled a class action for $190 million AUD with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders over unpaid wages between 1939 and 1972 (ABC 9 July 2019). It is noteworthy that it was not until a referendum in 1967 where Australians voted to amend laws to enable the Commonwealth to both make laws in respect to Aboriginal Australians and to include Aboriginals in the census. Many more instances across the Australian context, including unpaid work on Christian missions and in the pastoral industry, have contributed to intergenerational disadvantage and the stripping of culture and religious rites and traditions from Indigenous Australians (Anthony 2007).

Whilst many countries would join the wave of new independent nations in the 1960s and 1970s, including Nauru (1968), Samoa (1970), Fiji (1970), Tonga (1970) and Papua New Guinea (1975), others remained bound to their colonial forebears. New Caledonia, for example, voted to reject independence and remain a part of France in a 2018 referendum. Both Australia and New Zealand retain the Queen of England as their head of state despite functioning as sovereign nations, indicating the extent of European cultural, religious and political influence.
on the region to this day. Seats are reserved for Māori in the New Zealand parliament; however, none are reserved in the Australian Parliament for their Indigenous population, nor is there any recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Australian Constitution.

Religion and colonisation

Religion was an important constituent element of the colonisation of Oceania by the European powers. Australian Aboriginal religion and mythology, including the dreamtime and common founding myth of the ‘rainbow serpent’, have been found to coincide with geographic shifts dating back tens of thousands of years. All Indigenous peoples had their own tribal religion that not only structured social relations and gender divisions, but also governed the relationship of the people with the land. This was upended by the arrival of Christian missionaries seeking to convert ‘heathen’ Indigenous societies. In white Australia (1901–1972), this took the form of the removal of Aboriginal children, known as the ‘stolen generations’, and their being raised on church-run missions.

In the Pacific Islands, religious activity extended beyond mere conversion, with missionaries seeking to supplant their religious rivals, either the Wesleyan-Methodists (Protestants) in the case of French Roman Catholic Missionaries or vice versa:

By the end of the 1830s a large part of the Tonga Islands in Oceania had been Christianised by missionaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. One and a half decades after these missionaries from ‘Great-Brittany’, Roman Catholic missionaries undertook several efforts to establish themselves on the same Islands, and to convert the inhabitants to Christianity. The question why they did so may be answered to a large extent by making reference to comparable situations elsewhere in the world. For these missionaries considered Roman Catholicism as the ‘true religion’ and Protestantism as a deviation of the right doctrine. Consequently, according to the Catholic missionaries, not only the ‘heathens’ on the Tonga Islands should be converted to Catholicism, but those Tongans who had already been Christianised by the Methodists.

Missionaries used a variety of tools, including shame (Wesleyan Missionary Society 1844) and binary concepts such as ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ in condemning pre-Christian cultures as sinful (Press 2011: 146). Cultural practices and Indigenous gods were framed as ‘sinful’ and ‘weak’. Christianity was merged with and adapted to local cultures and conditions in order to develop in local context; ‘a kind of syncretism, in which Pacific Islanders modified doctrinal, ritual and organizational aspects to make them fit with the elaborate traditional hierarchies that continued to be a fundamental part of social life’ (Ernst 2012:31). The Māori of New Zealand were also heavily influenced by Christianity in the early 19th century, though syncretic forms, including the Pai Mārire (Good and Peaceful) and Kingitanga (Māori king movement), would emerge in the middle of the 19th century to challenge pākehā (white) domination. The latter continues to exist to the present day, and King Tūheitia plays a key role in the continuation of Māori tradition and solidarity amongst Indigenous peoples of Oceania.

In other cases, local chiefs sided with certain missionaries, exploiting old-country religious divisions in order to achieve favourable outcomes against tribal opponents (van der Grijp 1993). In more recent years, Pentecostal-charismatic churches emphasising a more egalitarian social structure have found particular favour in the region. The most successful of these churches has been the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal church in the world, founded in Arkansas in
1914 and constituted by over 140 autonomous churches that operate under the umbrella of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship. The Assemblies of God has had a presence in the Pacific Islands for over 70 years, though has not grown significantly due to the incorporation of charismatic elements into the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church and relatively recent arrivals such as the Church of Latter Day Saints, which was established in the region in the middle of the 20th century and attained considerable success in growth.

Even a cursory analysis of the religious demography of the region demonstrates how these old-world tensions have been recreated on the other side of the world. In the Tongan context, for example, of a census population of 100,266, the Free Wesleyan Catholic Church has the largest share of adherents at 35,082 (34.99%) followed by the Church of Latter Day Saints at 18,673 (18.62%) then the Roman Catholic Church (14.24%) (Tongan Department of Statistics 2016). The Assemblies of God by comparison are small in number at just 2,347 (2.34%) yet, as Olson notes, the Pentecostal church maintains a bold presence on the Tongan religious landscape (Olson 2001:13). Olson notes further that initially popular amongst economically and social marginalised Tongans, Pentecostalism built a larger base though remained an outlier, holding theological perspectives that challenged the norms of traditionalist Tongan society:

the Tongan Pentecostal church calls for members to recast their cultural orientation in order to follow a narrow religious pathway, even if it causes disruption in the members’ family, kin group, and community. The Pentecostal Church asserts that religious doctrine is more important than cultural norms, and members are encouraged to resist the ‘outside interests’ of Tongan society in matters of religious faith.

(Olson 2001:24)

As developing nations founded on traditional tribal principles, many of the nations of Oceania remain fertile for missionaries to the current day. These nations, small as many of them are, enjoy all the rights and benefits of international statehood. This gives organised religious groups in small Oceanic nations a chance to have a disproportionately significant impact on the international stage.

The primarily small Pacific Island nations are contrasted, however, by secular Australia and New Zealand. The Australian national census in 2016 revealed that whilst Christians cumulatively constituted a small majority of the population at 52.1 per cent, ‘No Religion’ at 30.1 per cent constituted the single category, followed by Catholicism at 22.6 per cent (ABS 2016). The New Zealand national census revealed an even starker differential. Just 37.1 per cent considered themselves to be Christian, whilst 48.59 per cent considered themselves to have ‘No Religion’ (Statistics New Zealand 2018). Given the presence of significant Pacific Island diaspora communities subscribing to highly religious and traditionalist conceptions of Christianity, it is predictable that at some point this would result in some form of tension.

Rugby, religion and colonisation

The sport of Rugby Union is widely believed to have originated in 1823 when schoolboy William Webb Ellis picked up the ball during a game of football and ran with it. Importantly for the context of this chapter, rugby is closely identified with the core values promulgated by ‘muscular Christianity’, which would become an integral component of the British Public School system in the 1850s (Watson, Weir and Friend 2005). Indeed, Watson et al. argue that the promulgation of sport and physical pursuits in English public schools such as Rugby, Eton and Uppingham was ‘arguably the most significant socio-cultural development to evolve from
“classical” muscular Christianity’, (ibid.) with the aim of encouraging Christian morality, developing character and strengthening the British Empire. The game would spread to the British colonies including the formation of the first club in Australia (1863), New Zealand (1870) and Fiji (1884). The Marist Brothers are believed to have introduced the game to Samoa in 1920, whilst Irish missionaries first took the game to Tonga in 1923. These were the glory days of the British Empire, and the game became closely associated with elite Christian nationalism. The hymn Jerusalem, for example, would become inextricably linked with the English national team. The game of Rugby League, founded in the north of England, would split in the late 19th century, precisely because working-class men could not afford to take the time to train and the potential personal cost of injury in order to play. The professionalisation of Rugby Union would be resisted by contrast until the 1995 World Cup, which would revolutionise not only the rules of the game as administrators sought to make it more attractive to sponsors, but also the search for marketable and match-winning talent. It was in this context that, like their colonial forebears searching the world for natural resources or missionaries searching for souls to save, the rugby talent scouts would sweep the globe and become a permanent fixture on the rugby fields of Oceania.

If the Pacific Islands have been targeted for colonisation by European states and missionaries teaching Western cultural norms and religious practices, a paradoxical situation has arisen in which the sport of rugby has become a proxy for Indigenous men to assume a form of hegemonic masculinity through sporting prowess whilst simultaneously seeing the Pacific Islands stripped of their talent through a form of talent expropriation by wealthier Western nations including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, England, France, Wales and the United States in a modern form of ‘rugby union and league colonialism’.

In this process, the men of Aboriginal Australia, Māori and Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands, albeit willingly, enter a highly precarious labour force characterised by immense physical hardship, sacrifice and risk of injury where failure may lead to permanent disability and injury and resignation, though success may lead to great rewards for an elite few, who then send wealth back to their families and villages in the form of reparation payments. Much as the dominant image of rugby union and league as played for the love of the game may be appealing, for many it is one of few potential paths to economic success (very often through representing overseas-based clubs and other countries) and to defining Indigenous pride. As young men make a name for themselves in their villages and local teams, they quickly catch the eye of networks of professional scouts who recruit them to private rugby schools on scholarships or to clubs overseas.

In order to fully understand the dimensions of this problem, it is important to look at the intersection of rugby, masculinity, nationalism and religion in Oceania. Speaking prior to the 2015 Rugby World Cup in England, Tongan Captain Nili Latu made the link between rugby and religion in Tongan culture abundantly clear:

Everything revolves around our faith. Without it we have no direction going into the World Cup. It’s something unique that we have as Tongans. If you look at how other teams are preparing with their sponsorship and stuff like that, we don’t have that, but our faith holds us together . . . It’s like a dictionary or manual, it tells us what to do in our whole lives, and we try to apply it to our work on the field as well.

(Rugby World Cup 2015)

Writing about the relationship between nationalism, religion and rugby in Fijian rugby, Guinnes and Besnier note that a local level, participation in rugby is used to define the in-group
ruga is one of the most focal activities for the construction of both masculinity and citizenship. In fact, it acts as one of the most visible markers of ethnic difference and of the exceptionalism of Indigenous Fijians, providing a symbol around which national consciousness is formed.

(Guinnes and Besnier 2016:1124)

Rugby in Fiji has become inextricably linked with religion. Kanemasu and Molnar claim that today’s Fijian culture is represented by the ‘three Rs’, ratuism (chiefly status), religion and rugby. And that cultural links between rugby and organised religion ‘have been pervasive and continue to permeate the country’s rugby culture today’ (Kanemasu and Molnar 2013:14, 19). Guinnes and Besnier further observe:

The national team quite proudly and openly displays its Christian identity, with prayers and hymns before and after matches, and references to “Phil 4:13” emblazoned on their jerseys: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthen us”. . . . It is a national image that is masculine, indigenous, heteronormative and Christian. It also excludes Indo-Fijians, women, and non-able bodied and gender non-conforming men of all ethnicities.

(ibid. 1124–1125)

Demonstrations of religiosity have become intimately associated with Pacific Island rugby union and league (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ9qZhqL_h8). From images of players pointing to the sky and making the sign of the cross after scoring a try and prayer circles at the end of international games (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGvVGd4fIJI) consisting primarily of Pacific Island players to the crowd at a 2017 New Zealand v. Tonga Rugby World Cup game breaking out hymns as the small island nation (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azys0QyVqDg), consisting of many hardened professionals (who had chosen to represent their home instead of adopted country), beat a global power of the game by a score of 28 to 22. Images of these highly religious players and crowds have been widely celebrated in the mainstream media (https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-18/tonga-delights-passengers-with-singing-at-rugby-world-cup/11524860). A detailed study between 2008 and 2010 of professional Pacific Island Rugby League players in Australia’s National Rugby League Competition found that 86 per cent of respondents utilised prayer as part of their pre-game ritual, whilst 68 per cent attributed part or all of their success in sport to their religious beliefs (Lakisa, Adair and Taylor 2014:356). Tellingly, 64 per cent believed that non-religious coaches and executives could do more to learn about the key role of religion in their lives (ibid.)

Masculinity amongst the Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand), a minority in the country they inhabited for hundreds of years before pākehā (white) colonisation, is similarly articulated at a global level, through rugby. Where every Pacific Island nation performs an Indigenous war dance prior to play commencing, the Māori haka, performed by both white and Māori players, has become arguably the most famous display of masculine pre-game aggression in global sport (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiKFYTFJ_kw). The haka filters throughout New Zealand rugby down to schoolboy level (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xyPJu3j5Rw).
Masculinity, religion, rugby in Oceania

Calabrò notes the close and enduring association between the conception of the Māori warrior and the Māori rugby player:

Rugby has played a significant role as a platform to maintain, transmit and make thrive an Indigenous model of masculinity as well as one of the main sites for contemporary Māori man to achieve mana (spiritual authority/prestige) and national acknowledgment.

(Calabrò 2016:245)

However, as in Fiji, this is inherently problematic, sanctioning and celebrating Māori physicality and violence whilst disguising structural racism that excludes Māori men from higher education and the professional workforce (Calabrò 2016:235). Importantly, the Māori ‘style’ of rugby was seen as distinct from pākehā rugby, with an emphasis on creativity and playing in the spirit of the game rather than focusing strictly on efficiency and winning, something ironically shared by the ‘Victorian gentlemanly amateurs’ of the Barbarians Rugby Football Club in Britain (Maclean 1999:13).

It is important to consider diasporic communities from Oceania that have settled in both New Zealand and Australia. Originally excluded from Australia by the White Australia Policy, which ended in 1972, Pacific Islanders of whom the majority are Polynesian (Samoan, Tongan and Cook Islander) started to arrive in the late 1970s, settling primarily in working-class Western Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. This figure has grown exponentially in recent years though still remains small as a percentage of the overall community, at 206,673 (0.88% of overall population) (Batley 2016). The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population stands at over 649,000 or 2.8 per cent of the Australian population. By contrast, Auckland (New Zealand) is the largest Polynesian city in the world, with approximately 200,000 claiming Polynesian ancestry and constituting over 15 per cent of the population. The 2018 New Zealand census reveals that 381,642, or 7.4 per cent of the population have a Pacific Island ethnicity, whilst the Māori population stands at 775,836 (16.5%) of the population, significantly larger than the Indigenous populations of Australia (Statistics New Zealand).

Indigenous and Pacific Islander people in both Australia and New Zealand, however, have significantly higher levels of incarceration. In New Zealand, Māori constitute 51.8 per cent of the prison population and Pacific Islanders, 11.7 per cent (Corrections New Zealand 2019), whilst in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute 28 per cent of the prison population (ABS 2018). Pacific Islander youth are significantly overrepresented in the Australian states of Victorian and New South Wales (Shepherd and Ilalio 2016). It is in this context that, for many, rugby offers an alternative path. Pacific Islanders make up between 60 and 80 per cent of registered rugby players in the state of Victoria (McDonald, Rodriguez and George 2019). Where Indigenous Australians and Māori have the occasional opportunity to represent select teams, such as the Māori All Blacks or Australian Rugby League Indigenous All Stars, the overwhelming opportunities for them come from playing for their national teams, requiring adherence to performative aspects including singing national anthems. For Pacific Islanders, an extra step is often required—pledging allegiance to an entirely new country, very often on the other side of the world through which very few organic links exist.

Players of Pacific Island background make up almost 20 per cent of the world’s professional player population. At the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan, 52 per cent (16) of the Australian squad featured players of Pacific Islander background, with many born locally and others having been handpicked for inclusion in Australian teams. A total of 55 players with Pacific Island heritage (approximately 25 per cent) playing for eight countries including England, Wales, France,
Japan, Australia and New Zealand would feature. Over 600 players of Pacific Island heritage play throughout the European leagues, yet as noted, by the head coach of the Olympic gold medal–winning Fijian Rugby 7’s men’s team Ben Ryan, exploitation is a key and ongoing issue:

Rugby league is doing some disgraceful things in Fiji—sending players one-way tickets to Australia on visas that don’t allow them to play professional sport, so they are immediately breaking the law. Then they outstay their visa, get deported and they are banned from going overseas ever again for work they might have done in the future. That is effectively a life sentence.

(Schofield 2018)

Chief executive of the International Rugby Players Association Rob Nichol stated, ‘the Islanders are being preyed upon, absolutely. There are some despicable individuals who capitalise on their desperation to make a better life for themselves and their families’ (Schofield 2018). France has been particularly noted for its willingness to recruit a cohort of young players for the French academy system, keeping just several for higher levels of rugby and returning those that fail to meet the grade.

Despite a short-lived Pacific Island combined rugby team (2004–2008), the Pacific Island nations have been largely marginalised in a game now driven by the neoliberal free market where players can be harvested from the Pacific Islands, yet the islands themselves are ignored or deliberately excluded because of their small market base and lack of potential profitability. This was demonstrated most recently when the International Rugby Board put forward a proposition for a ‘world rugby league’ bringing in new and high-growth markets in Japan and the United States, whilst ignoring the Pacific Islands who provide many of their players. This was widely criticised and almost resulted in a boycott of the 2019 Rugby World Cup by Pacific Island players.

Rugby has deep colonial roots in Oceania, and the root values of the game, derived from the concept of ‘muscular Christianity’, continue to resonate particularly loudly in the small highly religious island nations of the Pacific and their diaspora communities. Yet much like peoples with a history of colonisation, continued economic, social and political inequality persists. For many young men, rugby, be it union or league, offers a way out of poverty and a method of providing for the extended family. Many of these young men either at best, make it in diasporic contexts into national teams and well-paid professional contracts that last them as long as their body does before inevitable break-down, or at worst, end up exploited, like their forebears, providing cheap labour that can be commoditised and turned into profit for clubs across Europe. Important to note is that many more young men do not make it at all, increasing the attractiveness of other forms of kinship and activity to build upward economic trajectories.

Aboriginal, Māori and Pacific Island players are amongst the game’s greats in Rugby Union and League (not to mention Australian Rules Football and American Football, where they have made disproportionate impacts relative to their size in the wider community). Yet it has also become clear that this is tolerated, even celebrated, so long they remain seen and not heard. The most outrageous transgressions of behavioural codes can be tolerated in the name of team bonding, but to speak publicly on political or religious issues, as numerous generations of Australian Indigenous sportsmen have found out to their detriment, invites scorn and derision and, on some occasions, sanction. Outspoken players such as Anthony Mundine (who would later become a world boxing champion) and Latrell Mitchell have been punished for their transgressions, at best expelled from their club, and at worst, from the game. Players in other codes, including Australian Rules Football, such as Indigenous Australian (and 2014 Australian of the...
Year) Adam Goodes, would similarly leave the game. This chapter now turns to a key example of this, that clearly demonstrates the dimensions of the relationship between Oceanian masculinity and religion through rugby, the recent case of Israel Folau.

Israel Folau: the intersection of religion, masculinity and rugby

In a nation where sport is central to the national imagination, Isileli (Israel) Folau is indisputably amongst Australia’s greatest team sport athletes. He would also become central to an international-level controversy directly related to his expression of fundamentalist Christian views on same-sex marriage, homosexuality and gender-optional birth certificates, controversies that would demonstrate significant fault lines between the conservative fundamentalist practice of religion in Pacific Island cultures and its acceptance in secular Australia.

Born in Sydney in 1989 to Tongan Mormon parents, Eni and Amelia, Folau would represent Australia in underage Rugby League before first playing professional rugby in the National Rugby League competition for the Melbourne Storm at the age of 17, a game in which he scored a match winning try. He would become the National Rugby League’s top scorer in his first season, winning the competitions Rookie of the Year award and the Premiership before becoming the youngest ever player to represent Australia at 18 years of age. Questions persisted about whether Folau would forgo his career for two years to undertake his missionary work as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; however the Folau family would leave the Mormon church in 2009, converting to the Assemblies of God in 2011. This coincided with Folau’s switch to Australian Rules Football, a running game at odds with the brutal physical dimension of Rugby League. Folau would play 13 games in two seasons in a short and often derided career, before bringing his now unique skillset to Rugby Union, playing for the New South Wales Waratahs and making his Australian debut in the same season. Folau would again leave a church, this time the Assemblies of God, to move to the Australian megachurch Hillsong with Pastor Brian Houston. This would again be short-lived, and Folau would then join the ‘Truth of Jesus Christ Church’ established by his father (McClymont 2019). Over the course of his rugby career between 2013 and 2019, Folau became the fourth-highest try scorer in Australian Rugby history, winning the John Eales medal for the best player in Australia, a record three times in 2014, 2015 and 2017 becoming widely acknowledged as the best fullback in world rugby (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsFsj-cdvzo). This background is important in contextualising the public interest in events to follow.

Despite public demonstrations of his faith on the sporting field, Folau would not express his religious and political views until 2018 when he demonstrated his opposition to gay marriage in the Australian referendum and posted a Bible verse about faith to Instagram. Responding to a question about God’s plan for gay people, he replied citing the biblical verse 1 Corinthians 6: 9–10:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor the drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(Folau 2018)

In the aftermath of this incident, which saw Folau face public condemnation and receive a warning from Rugby Australia, he wrote for the Players Voice online blog outlining the role of...
religion in his life and how it shaped his life on a daily basis. Writing about his decision to join the Truth of Jesus Christ Church founded by his father, Folau wrote:

It was around this time I started attending a new church where I experienced God's love for the first time in my life. That's when I started to realise this was all part of God's plan for me. I had been hiding my inner thoughts and feelings from everyone around me, but God could see into my heart. He had to break me down in order to build me up again into the person He wanted me to be. It all suddenly made sense. I have tried to live my life in God's footsteps ever since. I follow his teachings and read the Bible all the time in order to learn and become a better person. Since that happened, I have been at peace and enjoyed life with an open, honest heart, which is why my faith in Jesus comes first. I would sooner lose everything—friends, family, possessions, my football career, the lot—and still stand with Jesus, than have all of those things and not stand beside Him.

(Folau 2018)

It would be the combination of fundamentalist Pentecostalism and his father Eni, a powerful influence on every aspect of his life, that saw Folau once again break with the wishes of Rugby Australia. Very shortly after having signed a three-year contract extension worth over $3 million, Folau released a post on Instagram and Twitter stating that hell awaits ‘Drunks, homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists and Idolaters’ and calling on them to repent. The post would be liked by over 70,000 individuals, including notable Pacific Islanders playing for the national teams of England and Australia. However, the post also received almost instant media coverage with significant implications for Rugby Australia, whose largest sponsor was, at the time, Qantas, headed by openly gay CEO Alan Joyce. Qantas and other sponsors immediately threatened to withdraw support for the national team.

Folau was stood down and faced a Rugby Australia Code of Conduct meeting where he was found to have committed a high-level breach of the professional players code of conduct warranting his dismissal. Subsequent administrative steps including mediation saw neither side move from their original position, though substantial divisions in the wider community were seen. Josiah Folau, a cousin of Israel, would outline the church position on the battle in biblical terms:

He's going against the Goliath that is Rugby Australia, with all its resources, to show that a single man who has the one true living God on his side is able to do anything.

(Philippians 4:13) (McClymont 2019)

The Australian Christian Lobby created a GoFundMe account to support Folau’s legal fees as they considered this a matter related to freedom of religious expression, raising over $1 million in 24 hours before being forced to create their own website when GoFundMe deleted the account, citing a violation of its terms of service. This new account raised $2 million before being suspended, this time because the desired amount had been reached. Many supporting Folau critiqued his modalism and non-trinitarian beliefs, with some even labelling them ‘heretical’ (Richards 2019) yet chose to support him on the grounds of supporting freedom of religious expression.

Folau brought an unfair dismissal case against Rugby Australia in the Fair Work Division of the Federal Circuit Court of Australia and is believed to have received a substantial payout. He remained unemployed for a considerable period, during which time he would make sermons
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linking the Australian bushfire crisis and drought to the 2017 legalisation of same-sex marriage and abortion:

Look how rapid these bushfires, these droughts, all these things have come in a short period of time. Do you think it’s a coincidence or not? God is speaking to you guys. Australia you need to repent and take these laws and turn it back to what is right.

(Australian Associated Press 2019)

That these sermons, delivering a core Pentecostal theme that the end of days is coming and demonstrating a clear genealogical lineage with the Tongan Assemblies of God Church, were delivered to a small physical congregation of just several dozen was beside the point. Their posting to Facebook and the subsequent scrutiny of Folau would ensure they were carried to an international audience and would be reported widely. In early 2020, Folau secured a playing role at the Catalan Dragons Rugby League Club in France, having been denied the right to return to Rugby League in Australia. Despite this causing considerable controversy amongst constituent clubs of the English Super League competition and the Catalan Dragons club distancing themselves from his past comments, with Folau committing to no longer speak publicly on his religious views (Bower 2019), wider public anger in France appears to be muted, with Folau receiving an offer to play Rugby Union from French Club Montpellier (Nicolussi 2020). At the time of writing, Folau had won clearances to return to club rugby league in the Australian State of Queensland with the backing of billionaire businessman and politician Clive Palmer and had just signed a contract with a Japanese Rugby Union Club, continuing his exile from Australian rugby.

The lasting legacy of the Israel Folau saga is yet to be determined. The conservative Australian Liberal party led by Pentecostal Prime Minister Scott Morrison have featured a Religious Discrimination Act as a central component of their party platform for a number of years and would introduce what has been labelled the ‘Israel Folau’ clause drafting of the legislation. This bill, deeply unpopular across the business, educational and wider community, would require companies with revenue of at least $50 million a year to prove that the sacking of an employee for expressing controversial religious opinions in a private capacity is necessary to ‘avoid unjustifiable financial hardship to the employer’ (Australian Government 2019). In the context of the Folau case, this financial hardship would appear to be a consequence of losing sponsorship; however, the bill did not make this clear (Ireland 2019).

A key emergent question results from the Folau case and its deeper context in Pacific Island religion, masculinity and rugby; how might we conceptualise the distinction between the celebration of acts of religion on the playing field, yet denote their denigration off them? An obvious starting point is the distinction between merely demonstrating faith and the possibility of causing offense, yet for many in secular societies, any expression of faith is offensive. A more compelling argument emerges from unpacking the role of neoliberal multiculturalism and its relationship with rugby as a profit-generating product.

Neoliberal multiculturalism: religion, masculinity and rugby

Pacific Islander players are celebrated in the mainstream media for their power, athleticism and exciting style of play. Every aspect of their play and public disposition is celebrated, from hymns and war dances prior to play to discussions about their celebratory styles and collective prayer, on the field, after games. Indigenous Australian players are likewise celebrated for their intuitive play and speed. These are viewed as part of the spectacle. However, a clear line exists between
those displays of religiosity in secular contexts and the expression of the content of this religiosity in secular context, particularly where it stands at odds with normative societal values in Western nations that have become increasingly secular such as Australia. This ties into the logic of the commercialisation of sport as McDonald et al. note:

> collectivist and diasporic ways of being counter or resist the ideological underpinning of neoliberal individualism. However, counter-identities don’t always fit well within the broader neoliberal structure of professional sport and maybe either misunderstood or ignored by stakeholders, management and coaches. So while their bodies may be valued, their ‘souls and personal welfare’ may often be ‘rendered worthless’. (McDonald, Rodriguez and George 2019:1927; Lakisa, Adair and Taylor 2014:359)

This devaluing of the substantive element of the player’s personality, as important as it may be to them, in favour of the physical spectacle is a broader constituent feature of neoliberal multiculturalism, as outlined by Kymlicka:

> Neoliberal multiculturalism for immigrants affirms—even valorises—ethnic immigrant entrepreneurship, strategic cosmopolitanism, and transnational commercial linkages and remittances, but silences debates on economic redistribution, racial inequality, unemployment, economic restructuring and labour rights. (Kymlicka 2013:110)

To this may be added religious political expression and in particular any attempt to challenge supporters by questioning their morality, because this causes discomfort and impacts profitability. Research by Roose and Possamai demonstrates that Australian governmental approaches to Islamic finance have been overall very positive, praising the potential economic benefits of greater engagement in this field of finance, yet discussions about legal pluralism (the acknowledgement of multiple legal systems) have been forcefully condemned by all sides of politics (Roose and Possamai 2015). Where commercial profit is possible, the neoliberal form of multiculturalism that predominates in Australia celebrates diversity, however where underlying power structures are even remotely challenged, action is taken to expel the problem from the community.

The Folau case may be viewed further in three ways. The first, secular (and colourless) lens sees a highly paid rugby athlete using a social media platform to bully LGBTIQ communities, including many no doubt amongst his supporter base, with potential adverse consequences for those young people but also for sponsors associated with him.

The second sees a devout Christian merely expressing his views in the public sphere on his own time and being punished and pilloried by the secular elite, particularly those who support LGBTIQ rights. This is the position epitomised by the Australian Christian lobby who are highly unlikely to engage with the theological or moral base of Folau’s church and who are unconcerned with historical inequality impacting the Pacific Islands or their diaspora populations, yet view an attack on him as opening up political potential to push for greater freedom of religious expression.

The third way of viewing this scenario is through a postcolonial lens that sees a young man of colour and Pacific Island heritage who has attained success, against the odds, in a sport where many young men of Pacific Islander heritage are considered as expendable cheap physical labour for rugby clubs and used and spat out. In this scenario, Folau is merely expressing
the fundamentalist religious doctrine foisted upon his people over generations back to the countries from whence it came. The same secular elite who express their support for multiculturalism and human rights, in this instance, see only hard-line conservative Christianity and react hysterically without any deeper questioning about the core drivers of these political views and their history (and continued sustenance) through churches based in Australia and New Zealand.

In the first sense, Folau is a religious zealot and bully; a highly paid globally recognised athlete aligned with powerful religious interests and using his fame as a pulpit for unacceptable intolerant beliefs. In the second, Folau is a popular and charismatic spokesperson for religious freedom who, irrespective of the theological orientation of his church, can be drawn upon as a resource to push for greater freedom of religious expression. In the final sense, the secular elite demonstrate the shallow political and historical base from which they derive their political perspectives, overlooking hundreds of years of physical and intellectual oppression of the Indigenous peoples of Oceania and how this has shaped their world views.

The truth, as might be expected, arguably lies somewhere in the middle and is assisted by reference to masculinity. As a young man of colour and Pacific Island background in a country where hegemonic masculinity is defined by the white male in the boardroom, where white men dominate on a significant scale (Soutphommasane 2017) or surf club (affiliated with the self-conscious association with the beach), Folau, like other religious Pacific Islanders and indeed, Indigenous Australians and Māori playing elite rugby, occupies a paradoxical role. Valued for their strong, athletic bodies, it might be considered that they definitively embody the hegemonic masculinity only ever dreamed of by the vast majority of Australian men, wearing the national jersey on the world stage, travelling the world and being paid, albeit temporarily, well above the salary of many politicians, senior executives, lawyers and surgeons. Yet this is only part of the equation. It is through the enforced silence of their very often highly conservative religious and political views that these men are no different to those who never made it to their level, occupying largely voiceless subordinate masculinities that are silenced in the face of white Australian corporate interests. Lest this be considered a binary representation, it is worth considering the case of white Zimbabwe-born Australian flanker David Pocock, arrested by police for chaining himself to a digger at a coal mine in rural New South Wales with members of the Leard Forest Alliance in 2014. Pocock was issued a formal written warning for breaching the Australian Rugby Union Code of Conduct yet would be widely celebrated for his continued environmental advocacy, including social media posts, and his stance on gay marriage, refusing to marry his partner until gay marriage was legal in Australia.

**Conclusion**

The case of Israel Folau speaks directly to the fault lines in Oceania as to the place of religion in society and different forms of masculinity that are inextricably linked to race, class and social location. As the Folau case and this chapter demonstrates, these fault lines are far from being healed, and any attempt to do so must address centuries of the impact of colonialism on the Oceania region. As it currently stands, for Indigenous and Pacific Islander peoples, value remains linked to their potential to generate profit. Masculinity and religion are profitable so long as these men stay in their narrow lane and remain seen and not heard. Little, it appears, has changed.
Notes

1 This chapter recognises the problematic application of the European concept of ‘Indigenous’. It is used here, as with ‘Aboriginal’ ‘Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Pacific Islander’ with the immense diversity of cultures in mind and capitalised accordingly. Over 500 tribal or national groups exist in Australia alone. This chapter was written on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, the traditional owners of the land from upon which sovereignty was never ceded.

2 Anthony Mundine would claim that racism and discrimination resulting from his advocacy of Aboriginal Australian politics resulted in his exclusion from representative teams and would leave Rugby League in 2000. In December 2019, 22-year-old Aboriginal player Latrell Mitchell would face significant racist social media trolling and make several statements about racism within Rugby League and refuse to sing the national anthem, arguably leading to a lower than reasonable offer for his services and his leaving the club with which he had just won a Premiership and World Club Championship.


4 Same-sex marriage was legalised in Australia in 2017, with the Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017 passing a vote of the Australian Parliament on 7 December 2017. This was after a non-compulsory postal survey in which 61.6 per cent of the Australian public voted in favour of legalising same-sex marriage and 38.4 per cent voted against. The only countries in Oceania to recognise same-sex marriage are Australia and New Zealand.

References


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