

Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories

Pacific islands communities and the media

Abstract: This article is intended to provide an overview of the role of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in Pacific Islands communities in New Zealand, setting it within the broader context of the Pacific and among Pasifika communities in Australia during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of their key roles in Island communities and communicating information about COVID-19, it focuses on the role of churches, drawing a contrast between evangelical/Pentecostal and mainstream religious bodies. Research findings suggest that much of the language used to oppose vaccination derived ultimately from the United States and that an inclination towards End Times eschatology was likely to have been key to the spread of conspiracy theories. However, the article also suggests that in spite of the presence of conspiracy theories and the media's concentration on the controversial behaviour of Bishop Brian Tamaki, most mainstream Pacific churches were highly alert to the reality of the virus and supportive of their communities.

Keywords: Anti-vaxxers, Australia, conspiracy theories, churches, COVID-19, Destiny Church, Fiji, news media, New Zealand, protests, Pacific diaspora, Papua New Guinea, religion, Samoa, Tonga

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Introduction

RESEARCH and reports by Sapkota, Hannah and Clark and others in *Pacific Journalism Review* (2022) have highlighted the presence of a core of anti-vaccination campaigners in Aotearoa New Zealand. This has been accompanied by research showing the influence of online conspiracy theorists of American origin in the Pacific, particularly in Fiji (Kant, Vanea and Titi-fanue, 2021). This article attempts to provide an overview of how COVID-19 conspiracy theories manifested themselves in Pacific communities, both within the diaspora and 'at home.'

This article focuses on the role of churches because they play an absolutely vital role in Pacific communities. A very high proportion of the total Pacific

population in New Zealand has at least one church affiliation (70.8 percent or 270,390 people) (Stats NZ, 2018).

Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in the United States have been important sites of opposition to vaccinations, masking and bans on gatherings. This places them at odds with the mainstream churches which enjoined their flocks to get vaccinated and generally encouraged adherence to government health regulations.

Oceania

Opposition to vaccinations and associated theories from these and other sources have been copied and spread in the Pacific. Opposition to vaccines was already a problem in Samoa, where anti-vaccination sentiment had been widespread during a measles epidemic in 2019. By the end of 2019, 70 people had died, most of them children. (United Nations, 2019) In many cases medical staff discovered that the dead had not been vaccinated because of anti-vaccination conspiracies circulating on the internet. *The Washington Post* quoted Dr Sheldon Yett, UNICEF representative in the Pacific, as declaring: ‘People who are spreading lies and misinformation about vaccinations are killing children’ (Gerson, 2019). The United Nations noted in June 2020 that opposition to a vaccine had already emerged online, even before such a vaccine existed (United Nations, 2020). Discussing the situation in Fiji, the Asia Foundation’s 2021 report *COVID-19 Awareness, Online Discourse and Vaccine Distribution in Melanesia*, said:

Large Facebook groups in Fiji are promoting false narratives relating to COVID-19 that reconfigure foreign disinformation to explain local events and confirm locally-held beliefs. Despite the fact that the technology does not exist in Fiji, local Facebook communities seized upon anti-5G misinformation originating in US and European media ecosystems and drew a connection between 5G networks and local COVID-19 infections, lockdowns, and unrelated natural phenomena. In addition, while awareness of the importance of handwashing and quarantining is nearly universal, a lower but still substantial number of respondents appeared to believe in false or pseudoscientific ‘protective measures’ that have spread widely on social media, such as avoiding mobile phone towers or avoiding cold foods and cold temperatures. (Asia Foundation, 2021)

The report continued:

Information ecosystems, including modes of online messaging by public officials, shape the flow of misinformation. Papua New Guinea’s information ecosystem is particularly affected by public distrust and confusion about COVID-19 messages, likely contributing to the finding that one in six respondents in the country believe COVID-19 is a ‘hoax’ or not real. (Asia Foundation, 2021)

MacDonald (2021a) described vaccination campaigns in Papua New Guinea in 2021 as being the subject of violent attacks and death threats, driven by fear and the powerful influence of Pentecostal and evangelical churches. These churches have a strong orientation towards the End Times, a period of tribulation and suffering they believe is outlined in a literal interpretation of the final book of the New Testament, Revelations.

Crucially, the imminent return of Christ is heralded by the world's rapid moral decline and humanity being branded with the mark of the beast—a process mandated by Satan. As such, many Papua New Guinea Christians continuously and fearfully scan the horizon for this definitive sign. Years ago, some Papua New Guineans . . . declared barcodes were the mark. More recently, they insisted it was the government's national ID card initiative. Now, in a completely different order of magnitude and intensity, it is the COVID vaccine. One group protesting a vaccine drive chanted, 'Karim 666 chip go!', or 'Get out of here with Satan's microchip'. (MacDonald, 2021a)

Elsewhere in the Pacific, 11 Fijian Methodist ministers resigned from their positions in 2022 rather than be vaccinated. The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination in Fiji, with 36.2 percent of the total population (300,000) including 66.6 percent of indigenous Fijians. A total of 10 ministers of the Christian Mission Fellowship Church also quit over their refusal to be vaccinated (RNZ, 2022).

In 2021, senior Methodist leaders were warned against influencing people not to be vaccinated. The church's general secretary, the Reverend Ilesia Naivalu told church ministers to stop circulating what he called 'baseless videos' and 'wild claims' on social media. He said they were 'aiding the dark intents of those that created these lies' (RNZ, 2021).

In the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare attacked a small group of health workers who he said had promoted misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine safety and effectiveness. He said it was 'extremely sad' the group had ignored evidence about the important role vaccines played in keeping the pandemic under control and instead spread disinformation (Blades, 2012).

An anti-mask video by UK conspiracy theorist David Icke had been translated into multiple languages including te reo Māori and Pacific languages and shared widely (Broughton, 2020). Icke is best known for his claim that the world is controlled by lizard people from another planet (Icke, 2023)

In Australia, this kind of anti-vaccination conspiracy has also taken hold among the diasporic Islander community. The best known conspiracist is Australian-Samoan Taylor Winterstein, whose anti-vaccination rhetoric has been described as 'irresponsible' by the Australian Medical Association and a 'public

health threat' by the Samoan Ministry of Health for her comments during that country's measles epidemic. She once claimed a jar of ground-up rice would cure autism and has continued to propound anti-vaccination myths during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bedo, 2021).

During the second year of COVID-19, many Pacific community leaders in Australia said they were worried about how widely misinformation about the virus was being spread. Reverend Matagi Jessop Vilitama, a Uniting Church minister in Sydney, told the ABC it was sad to see conspiracy theories growing within religious groups.

I'm very concerned, because if religion is about life, and it's about life sustenance . . . then we will do our utmost best to preserve life. There's an element there that [Pacific Islanders] are vulnerable, especially through social media, to misinformation. (Faa, 2021)

Aoteoroa New Zealand

Conspiracy theories also exist among the Pacific diaspora in Aoteoroa New Zealand. Among the conspiracies in circulation in New Zealand have been claims that vaccines contain microchips, that they can alter human DNA, that they contain cells from aborted babies, that they contain software that can be updated remotely via 5G mobile networks and they are the mark of the Beast mentioned in Revelations (Satherley, 2021; Revelation, 13:17).

Recent investigations by *Kaniva News* into the phenomenon show that the Tongan diasporic community in New Zealand is also vulnerable to such anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. In 2022, *Kaniva News* reported that Tongan anti-vaxxers were still circulating a two-year-old video whose claims had long since been debunked. The video, featuring Indian-born American entrepreneur Dr Shiva Ayyadurai, claimed COVID-19 could be treated with hydroxychloroquine and vitamins.

Ayyadurai, who is not actually a medical doctor and who was briefly linked to disgraced American President Donald Trump, also claimed there was a giant global conspiracy to make everybody have a chip, destroy the American economy, and make everybody the slave of a network of powerful figures, including the Chinese Communist Party, Bill Gates, the Clintons and the United Nations (Cass, 2022).

Research has shown a number of reasons for the spread of anti-vaccination conspiracies in the Pacific communities. Research by the New Zealand Ministry of Health and others suggests this may be because of lack of education, mistrust of government sources, uncertainty and cultural isolation.

In some Islander communities, conspiracy theories around COVID-19 and vaccination became quite aggressive, even targeting community leaders. Fa'anānā Efeso Collins, who stood unsuccessfully for the mayoralty of Auckland against

Wayne Brown in 2023, said he had received threats and calls for his excommunication from his church for supporting a call for vaccinations in South Auckland in 2021. The area was deemed to be at high risk of infection. Fa'anānā told *The New Zealand Herald* that conspiracy theories had been circulating since the start of the pandemic, many coming from small breakaway churches (Satherley, 2021). Government research showed that some micro churches were supported by only 10 to 40 families.

Religious historian Peter Lineham, who is based at Massey University, argued that conspiracies could make people feel as if they had discovered the truth that nobody else had. He said conspiracy theories arose among people who did not have the education or cultural background that would allow them to connect with scientific evidence.

I think that's where the problem comes—people who have got reason to be suspicious of the experts then start thinking, 'they're hoodwinking us, they're telling us something that isn't true'. What happens in religious communities is kind of a whispering game, where people pass information from one to another and suddenly there's a whole lot of people verifying something on no information at all. Once you've got that extra information, you feel 'enlightened'—you feel as though you see through the things that have been deceiving the world overall. (Satherley, 2021)

Fear also seems to have played a part in how some people reacted. In the United States a large scale study of online communication by Stanford University found discussion around COVID-19 fell into two broad areas. In one, the virus was described as a hoax or exaggerated threat (with claims that testing gave false positives or hospitals were secretly empty), In the other, the epidemic was described it as a bioweapon spread on purpose by Bill Gates, the Chinese, or some super-conspiracy of people who really controlled the world. The research showed that people were likely to read and share such ideas when they felt threatened by the virus (Suciu, 2022).

Elsewhere in the US, research has linked support for conspiracy theories to membership of evangelical churches and support for the Republican Party, especially Donald Trump. Jackson (2021) argued that white Republicans and white evangelicals formed 'a particularly toxic anti-vax stew' and said they were among the most likely groups in the United States to refuse vaccination.

According to Jackson, 84 percent of white evangelicals believed that God controlled everything that happened in the world and were more likely than any other Christian group to believe that God would punish nations for the sins of some of its citizens and that natural disasters were 'a sign from God'. Such ideas have been expressed by Bishop Brian Tamaki, leader of New Zealand's pentecostal Destiny Church. Research conducted by the *Journal of Psychology*

and Theology had found that some evangelical Christians rationalised illnesses like cancer as ‘God’s will’ (Jackson, 2021).

The overwhelming nature of the events surrounding us may simply have made the COVID-19 epidemic too much to comprehend for many people. Coupled with the threat of climate change, uncertainty over China’s intentions in the Pacific (and Russia’s later invasion of the Ukraine in 2022) may have prompted people to seek simpler or more simplistic pseudo-solutions. These may take a variety of forms, which may rely on ideas that the virus was the result of deliberate action rather than an accident, or the application of a framework that sees it in terms of the End Time eschatology favoured by fundamentalist churches for whom the Book of Revelations (like the rest of the Bible) is seen as the literal word of God.

The first broad interpretation of events is that the COVID-19 virus is part of an enormous plot of the kind described by Ayyadurai (Cass, 2022) in which a group of conspirators want to take over the planet and establish a new world order. Pursuing ideas such as this online plunges the researcher into an enormous tangle of claims about Davos, the CIA, the Illuminati, lizard men in the moon and a secret tunnel from a pizza shop in Washington into the White House.

The other is based on a particular interpretation of the Book of Revelations and sees COVID-19 as a sign of the End Times and vaccination as the mark of the Beast. In New Zealand, for instance, the pastors at the evangelical Christchurch church Celebration Centre, Murray and Nancy Watkinson, have preached that humanity is in the End Times (Broughton, 2021). Murray Watkinson is reported to have talked about things that were ‘going to happen in the End Times,’ such as mandatory vaccinations. He suggested the COVID-19 vaccine could be the ‘mark of the Beast’ Citing Revelations, he said those without the mark would not be able to buy, sell and trade. ‘What if you’re not vaccinated, and they won’t allow you to go into a supermarket to actually shop?’ he asked (Broughton, 2021).

Many of these ideas can be seen reflected in the behaviour of Bishop Tamaki and his followers. (MacDonald, 2021) As self-appointed Bishop of his own pentecostal Destiny Church, Tamaki, his wife Hannah, and their followers have been involved on the fringes of New Zealand politics for several years. They have attracted notoriety for blaming the Christchurch earthquake on ‘gays, sinners and murderers’ (MacDonald, 2021b). As a pentecostal organisation, Destiny Church is driven by the same obsession with the End Times that apparently occurred at the Celebration Centre. Fraser MacDonald explained Tamaki’s behaviour:

Pentecostals are deeply concerned with the end of human history as the precursor to Christ’s return and the establishment of God’s paradisaical kingdom. The Tribulation is a seven-year nightmare of evil and suffering featuring the rise of a nefarious ‘new world order’. Within this end times scenario, all humanity is branded with the mark of the beast, a process authorised by Satan. An apocalyptic plague and Satanic mandates for

vaccination provide further prophetic justification for a pro-healing, anti-vaccination position.

Pentecostals are not huge fans of worldly entities and human rules. They prefer divine authority, spiritual inspiration and Biblically sanctified morality. The Kingdom of God is juxtaposed with the debased platforms of government and capitalism. Translated into the pandemic context, the continual legislative and policy directives of the government are, by virtue of their human origin, tainted with iniquity. (MacDonald, 2021b)

At the beginning of the epidemic, Tamaki described COVID-19 as a sign that the world had ‘strayed from God’, but claimed that his followers would be protected, a message the Reverend Dr Helen Jacobi, vicar at central Auckland’s St Matthew-in-the-City, described as dangerous and offensive (Neilson & Collins, 2020). Tamaki decided to put his views on COVID-19 into action and led several illegal rallies in Auckland’s Domain to protest against masking mandates and restriction on gatherings. He was arrested three times for his behaviour and, briefly, barred from the Domain. He was supported by another Auckland-based pastor, Peter Mortlock, who runs the City Impact Church (Tan, 2021).

In December 2021, Tamaki threatened to blow up mobile vaccination vans if they went near schools. He was quoted as telling his congregation in a sermon: ‘If you go in there with your wagon, I’ll tow your wagon away and I’ll get the boys to blow it up and all your syringes, we’ll run you out of town’ (Pearse & Leaske, 2021).

While media and academic attention has focussed on the evangelical and pentecostal churches and their role in opposing vaccinations and nurturing conspiracy theories, it is worth noting the broader role of churches during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which appear to have been far more benign on both a local and international scale. Mainstream churches consistently backed vaccinations, with Pope Francis describing being immunised as being an ‘act of love’. ‘Getting vaccinated is a simple yet profound way to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable,’ the Pontiff said (Watkins, 2021). He later described vaccination as a moral obligation and said everybody on the planet should have equal access to the drugs (VoA, 2022).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has a large following throughout the Pacific, urged people to be vaccinated. The church’s elders said a war was being fought against an unrelenting pandemic and issued a number of statements during 2021 saying that they supported immunisation (Walch, 2021).

While an obsession with COVID-19 as a sign of the End Times was common among evangelical and pentecostal churches, there were many moderate voices from the conservative spectrum of Christianity in the United States who did not see it this way. Jarrett (2020), for instance, cautioned:

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While COVID-19 is likely not one of the seven last plagues of Revelation, nor a sign of the end times, it is still very real. And as Christians, we need to respond appropriately to it. The first thing that we should do is to follow the directions of our government and medical experts.

Robertson (2020) argued:

It won't be long before someone is publishing an End Times book, showing how Revelation prophesied COVID-19 and is a sign of the End. I don't believe that—in fact, I regard that as an irresponsible use of Scripture in direct defiance of John's warning at the end of this book, not to add anything to his words.

David Jeremiah, leader of a Southern Baptist megachurch, had this exchange with a parishioner:

Q. I'm trying to make sense of this vaccine. I believe it is a prelude to the mark of the Beast. What's your opinion on the vaccine? Should we be afraid of it?

A. Without a doubt, prophecy casts its shadow on current events. What we are seeing now is an example of how the Antichrist could operate during the Tribulation period. This does not mean the COVID-19 vaccine has anything to do with the Antichrist—it merely provides an illustration of how his mark might be applied after the Lord comes for His Church.

Research carried out by the New Zealand government after the first phase of the epidemic revealed some interesting data that make it appear that the conspiracy theorists and protesters may not actually have had a widespread effect among Pacific communities in New Zealand.

A survey of the role of Pacific churches during the 2020 lockdown by the Ministry of Pacific Peoples states unequivocally that they were vital in holding Islander communities together and providing support. Based on an investigation of four Protestant churches in the North and South Islands, one Methodist (Tongan), one Assembly of God (multicultural), one Assembly of God (Samoan) and one Congregational (Samoan), the report noted:

It became evident that many churches were actively contributing to support the needs of their church communities and ensuring key messages were delivered to the wider Pacific community. Many adopted new ways of communicating and engaging with their members via digital platforms, holding online services and providing digital daily encouragements. All these were demonstrations of the significant role that churches play in Pacific communities and the resilience of Pacific communities to navigate and adapt to change during times of crisis.

Further, despite the protests and the conspiracy theories, a survey by Kantar Public on behalf of the Ministry of Health in the wake of the first phase of the epidemic, reported that during the first major lockdown, Pacific peoples had some of the highest rates of COVID-19 testing in New Zealand. The report went on to say:

Although it is clearly recalled as a time of uncertainty, difficulty and worry, it is also a time when churches and community leaders . . . demonstrated real leadership and initiative with their responses, prioritising the wellbeing of the community, providing support to many . . . when people were facing hardships and being part of the information cascade and action. The Pacific community took pride in having among the lowest rates of COVID-19 infection, showing the prevalence of solidarity in the community, and acting in the best interest to protect elders and fanau. (Kantar Public, 2021)

The report went on to provide an interesting view of the role of the media in providing accurate information that somewhat contradicts the image of everybody being led astray by conspiracy theories. It argues that most people were happy to rely on the government for information and regarded it as trustworthy at the time. However, in the wake of the lockdown, people reported that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information coming at them on social media. It may well be that people found it easier to accept what Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and health spokesman Ashley Bloomfield said. One respondent noted that Bloomfield had ‘integrity’ and added: ‘If he says that we need to trust the science then I would believe him.’ (Kantar Public, 2021)

The report went on to say that demographic issues were at play, with older people more likely to be confused by incorrect information than other groups. Curiously, younger people—who were praised by the Ministry for Pacific Peoples report for providing technical support during the lockdown so people could establish their digital communities, reported that they did not recall seeing a lot of information about vaccination online. The report concluded:

It is important to note that few people seemed to believe in any of the specific conspiracy theories in circulation. It is rather the sheer volume of them, particularly in the absence of other credible sources of information, that seems to be creating a climate of uncertainty.

In May 2021, more than 100 Pacific church ministers, their families and congregation members received their COVID-19 vaccinations in Ōtara. Reverend Dr Featunai Liuaana said it was important that church leaders showed their communities that the vaccination was safe to help alleviate any fears. ‘People are hearing so much information about the vaccination, much of which is not

true.’ he said. ‘As church leaders we need to walk the talk and show them it’s safe and easy to do’ (Te Whatu Ora/Health New Zealand, 2021).

At the Sāmoan Methodist Māngere Central church all 120 members of the congregation were vaccinated by the end of 2021. Reverend Suiva’uia Te’o said she talked to her congregation about why they should be vaccinated and left it to them. She said she had no time for Christian leaders calling the COVID-19 vaccine the mark of the Beast. ‘I don’t agree. I think it’s just an excuse and they need to get vaccinated,’ she told Radio New Zealand. ‘I’m convinced [the vaccine] has been developed with God-given wisdom and knowledge by professionals so we can be safe’ (Latif, 2021).

Conclusions

This article opens up several avenues for further exploration. It would be extremely useful to look at what is being said online in all the Pacific languages and see whether there is any difference in what is being said in diasporic sources and home Island sources. This would allow for a much broader examination of sources other than those in English. It would also recognise the multilingual environment in which New Zealand’s Ministry of Health has had to operate, with information and advice being available online for Pacific communities from the Ministry of Pacific Peoples (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, n.d.) and the government’s Unite Against COVID-19 campaign (COVID, n.d).

While the WHO has declared the COVID-19 emergency over, it has not gone away and people continue to contract the disease and die from it. When the WHO’s Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared the emergency over in May 2023, the cumulative cases worldwide stood at 765,222,932, with 6,921,614 deaths (WHO, 2023). It would therefore also be useful to conduct a longitudinal study examining whether anti-vaccination and conspiracy theory messages have changed and in what way since 2020.

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GOVERNANCE, DISINFORMATION AND TRAINING

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