

## God-given right to be offensive

There was a time in human history when belief in a greater being was required if you wanted to belong to a community.

Those claiming to speak for the god in whatever form he took (and he was almost always a he) held much power, sometimes even more than rulers, who took charge by force rather than spiritual persuasion.

That form of societal organisation was dominant for thousands of years, with monarchs keeping the people physically safe, priests minding their inner wellbeing.

The two acted in concert when the European version came to our part of the Pacific, the monarchy and its commercial allies looking for resources, land and strategic presence, the clergy softening the impact by converting the supposed “heathens” to a new and gentler form of worship - no cannibalism, less tribal warfare, education, a written language.

The “heathens” realised that mana (one of their words) could be obtained by those first to co-operate with the invaders, especially their religion, which could be modified to suit host purposes.

Early converts were themselves used to convert others, and the new religion in its various forms spread so rapidly that within decades the majority of people in the Pacific archipelagos had adopted Christianity, often with greater fervour than its original agents and their own flocks.

From the 1960s, the “original” Christians whose families settled the South Pacific began to lose their devotion. A generation - the infamously self-indulgent baby-boomers - was freed from the constraints of fertility and chastity, and fuelled (some of them) by novel ways to open their minds, or at least alter them.

One of the BB’s quasi-religions, rugby, also began to change and in fact slip partially away from the traditional grasp of Palangi New Zealand. Enormous Pacific Islanders, whose families originally came here as cheap labour, began to make their weight felt in the game, literally.

Who can forget the strapping thighs of Bryan Williams, the crashing runs of Jonah Lomu, the fearless tackling of Michael Jones? The “contact” in contact sport took on new meaning. Luckily, new sports opportunities also appeared for those wanting to escape rugby’s hold on their psyche, as well as its newly perceived hazards.

But back to religion. Those whose dominance has rapidly grown in rugby mostly retained the colonial belief systems abandoned by more than half the population, and now that they (with Māori) make up half the numbers in rugby’s top teams, they’re in a position to remind us those beliefs remain fundamentally important to them.

Israel Folau’s seeming recalcitrance in expressing his beliefs turns out not to be the rogue actions of a loner. He is sticking to his right as prescribed in modern law – the one about not suffering religious discrimination – and many fellow Pacific Islanders have voiced support, including some who play rugby.

There lies a paradox. The power structure of the dominant sport of those who once obeyed equally dominant religious strictures now finds itself being reminded of those constraints by a recently risen dominant force that still holds them dear.

What does *The Bible* actually say, ask those who long ago eschewed religion? The *New York Times* recently published a debate between two clerics - one gay, the other not – about four *Bible* passages that taken literally rail against homosexuality as fervently as Folau quotes them.

Given the steady acceptance of LGBT rights in an increasing number of countries (but not mainstream churches, quite) the arguments of the gay debater seemed as convincing as those of his opponent.

And there lies the problem for Folau and for all of us. His approach tends to be *Old Testament* fire and brimstone (actually, three of the four relevant *Bible* passages are *New Testament*), while liberal religious leaders and some followers now accept – sort of – the reality of modern law, which in New Zealand decriminalised homosexuality more than 30 years ago.

Folau has some rights to make his social media attacks, but those were dissipated when he signed his contract with the Australian Rugby Union, whose administration obviously felt it was taking a modern legal approach.

A question remains: can the beliefs – notwithstanding their lack of modernity – of a community that now holds considerable power within rugby be so conveniently signed away, for marketing and image reasons as much as any other?

Folau's case is expected to embark on an expensive journey through the justice system. Let’s hope that results in equitable law in the face of such intricate social complications.