The coming of Christianity

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CHRISTIANITY CAME TO OCEANIA IN THREE MAJOR WAVES, beginning in the eighteenth century in Polynesia, moving into Melanesia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then completing its coverage in the period since the end of the Second World War. Each of these initiatives reflected the renewed vitality of European and North American Christianity and their offshoots in Australia and New Zealand. Such expansion would not have been possible without the colonial growth of Britain, France, Germany and the trading links with Australia and New Zealand. Both these countries believed that God had permitted colonization, so that they could be forward bases for the conversion of Asia.

Europeans, however, were not the only agents of mission. Thousands of Pacific Islanders shared in the evangelization of the region, travelling to neighbouring islands as well as within their own territory, and then moving as pioneers into Melanesia. Some were martyred, but hundreds died of tropical diseases such as malaria, including wives and children. They gave Christianity a Pacific face and speeded the process of indigenization. Though they were supervised by Europeans, they brought their own cultural emphases, new technologies, crops and religious priorities. Missionaries were often dismayed by the speed with which Christianity was inculturated, for they were often unable to distinguish between their own form of Christianity and the different forms of discipleship which emerged in the Islander churches. Many had no conception of the ways in which European Christianity was also shaped by history and culture, and were too often dismissive of the inability of Polynesian and Melanesian languages to convey European meanings.

Great cultural variety characterized the region. Terms like 'Polynesian' and 'Melanesian' are European constructs. They can be very misleading, and about as useful as 'European' in doing justice to the difference between the Russians and the Welsh. Oceania contains two main linguistic families. The Polynesian languages have considerable similarities, but the Austronesian languages of Melanesia have huge variety. In Papua New Guinea with some four million people there are over seven hundred languages, each with its own complex

culture and mythology. The impact of colonialism and evangelization has forced the peoples of the Pacific to think in new ways about their regional identity, beyond the basic reality of clan, village and tribe. The nations which have emerged into independence since the 1960s have had a great deal of difficulty reconciling familial, tribal and national identities. Christianity has provided important resources for unity, but has also contributed to new kinds of divisiveness through denominational and sectarian rivalries.

Beyond Eurocentric readings

Historically, the process of colonialism and evangelization has often been read Eurocentrically, with the islanders portrayed as victims of European cultural arrogance and strange new diseases which killed island populations in tens of thousands, not to mention the social dislocation caused by labour recruitment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While that is part of the region's history, more recent research has underlined the skill with which Islanders adapted European religion, culture and technology to their own purposes. A growing number of Islander scholars are revising the history of the region as defined by Europeans, especially in the story of the coming of Christianity. This can no longer be written as the history of missions. Anthropologists have also underlined the complexity of religious changes, and the strength of the continuities between primal religion and Christianity.

The first recorded contact between Islanders and European Christians was in 1568, when the Spanish explorer Mendana landed on Ysabel (as he called it) in the Solomon Islands and attended mass with the ship's company. The exchange was courteous, but incomprehension was mutual between locals and visitors. The only lasting result of the visit was the Spanish names of some of the Islands. A Prefecture Apostolic had been established in Manila late in the seventeenth century, but no missionary initiative followed in the region south of the Equator for another century. European explorers gradually expanded knowledge of Oceania during the eighteenth century, until the voyages of James Cook dramatically widened European perspectives on Oceania's geography, flora, fauna and peoples. Even more potent was the mythology of an exotic Oceanic paradise, where Islanders lived happily with nature in societies without the corruptions of Europe. Islanders likewise created their own account of the visitors, often describing them in language appropriate to gods, because of their superior technology. Both groups took time to discover that the reality

was not so ideal. It was missionaries who helped to create another powerful set of stereotypes about the primitive savagery of the region and its child races, who needed generations of Christian civilization before they could hope to emulate Europeans. That racism still survives in surprising places.

Catholics and Protestants alike were tantalized by the missionary challenge of Oceania and their duty to save the Islanders from damnation. Protestants also saw missionary work as part-fulfilment of the coming millennium. A Catholic mission from Peru in 1772 lasted only a year in Tahiti. The London Missionary Society sent a group which arrived in 1797, with plans to evangelize not only Tahiti, but also the Marquesas and Tonga. They were taken aback by the difficulty of the language, the amused contempt of the Maohi and the strangeness of the culture. Within a year, a number of them had sailed to the safety of Sydney because of tribal wars. A minority stayed in Tahiti and Moorea and gradually persuaded a leading chief, Pomare, that there were advantages in Christianity. He saw no need to change his lifestyle, but was fascinated by books and writing and the advantage of peace. After victory over his rivals, he requested baptism in 1812, but this was postponed until 1819. By this action, the missionaries recognized the importance of chiefs in communal conversion and the creation of Christian societies through legal codes, drawn up with missionary advice. This also consolidated the power of certain chiefs. In addition, numbers of Maohi had begun praying societies, keeping the Sabbath and learning to read the translation of the Bible.

Numbers of the young men who were baptized were willing to travel to other islands to spread their new-found faith. John Williams of Raiatea planted these missionaries on a number of other islands in the 1820s and 1830s. Papeiha landed on Aitutaki in the Cook Islands, risking his life, but within a year transforming the communities' religious practice and helping them to build a substantial church. Others went to Hawaii, Tonga, Samoa, Fiji and other parts of what is now French Polynesia. They knew the customs, language and religion of other Polynesians, respected the power of chiefs, and knew the boundaries of the sacred and the common. Even more important was their experience of social and religious change, their ability to impart literacy and to give other Polynesians the skills to adapt European technology and culture.

Shifts in religious culture

The religions of Oceania were polytheistic, with some cultures recognizing the place of a high god. Sacred power for successful living was termed *mana*, focused in chiefs and priests and protected by complex boundaries covered by *tapu*. This served to protect the sacred from what was common, labelled *noa*. Prayers were used for every aspect of life, with the more important issues of birth, sickness and death dealt with by complex priestly rituals. Sometimes human sacrifice was involved. Victors in war often ate parts of the defeated to absorb their mana, or to complete their degradation. Physical bravery was highly valued, but so was deceit that led to victory. Religion was not concerned with motive, but with results. When Europeans came with such superior technology to societies which had no metal tools or firearms, Islanders speedily saw the advantages which possession of such artefacts offered. They tested the power of the new religion against the old taboos, and jettisoned placation of the traditional deities. The most striking example of this occurred in the Hawaiian Islands before missionaries arrived, with chiefs initiating rejection of taboos.

Dramatic changes also occurred in New Zealand in the 1830s and 1840s. By 1845 reliable estimates suggested that about half the population of 100,000 were worshipping regularly. Observance of the new religion often preceded British missionaries. Former slaves, captured in the destructive tribal wars of the 1820s and 1830s, were released by their captors when they became Christians. They took home skills in literacy and stories of power, so that thousands of Maori were worshipping in churches they had built. Rivalry for a resident missionary was keen, and the comparative value of Anglican, Wesleyan and Roman Catholic versions of Christianity was vigorously discussed before invitations were finalized.

Some Polynesians modernized traditional religion, but on their terms, not according to missionary priorities. Papahurihia in Northland, New Zealand, was a blend of traditional religion and modified Christianity. So were the Siovili and Mamaia movements in Samoa and Tahiti. Missionaries were hostile to such movements, for they believed that Christianity must replace the old religion, rather than be inculturated within local culture. Such movements were deemed satanic. During and after the New Zealand Wars, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many Maori left the churches for indigenous prophetic movements such as Pai Marire, Ringatu, the King Movement and others. Te Ua, Te Kooti, Tawhiao, Te Matorohanga and Te Whiti

were remarkable religious leaders by any standard, demonstrating the strength of traditional culture and willingness of Maori to use Christianity to enhance their identity.

Indigenous clergy were initially described as 'teachers', but by the end of the nineteenth century most villages had an ordained indigenous pastor in Protestant communities. Their leadership had some element of traditional priesthood, but also provided another source of sacred authority alongside that of hereditary chiefs. Colleges like Takamoa on Rarotonga and Malua in Samoa trained hundreds of pastors and their wives, giving them a grounding in cultural and scientific subjects, as well as teaching them about the Bible, theology, Christian history and the skills for leadership in worship, education and pastoral care.

One of the most moving examples of the quality of such leadership can be seen in Ta'unga from the Cook Islands, whose missionary journal from New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands provides vivid insight into traditional religion and the changes brought by Christianity. He also served in Samoa, before returning to complete his ministry in the Cook Islands.

Catholic missions

Another strand of Christianity came to the Pacific through the revival of missionary congregations in France after the Revolution of the 1790s. The Picpus fathers were pioneers in what is now French Polynesia, after unsuccessfully attempting to bring Catholicism to the Hawaiians. The already established Protestant missionaries persuaded Queen Pomare to expel them, but the arrival of a French naval vessel changed that. Their most successful work was on Mangareva, where Laval founded a model Catholic society.

The other great missionaries in the first phase of evangelization were the Marists. They were initially placed under the authority of Bishop Pompallier, but constant problems of jurisdiction led to the establishment of other vicariates apostolic in Oceania, leaving Pompallier to evangelize the Maori and to turn them from the errors of Protestantism. He was a great missionary, but a poor administrator, whose limitations were magnified by constant shortage of funds. He learnt Maori quickly and strategically placed missionaries in the Bay of Plenty and central North Island, where they speedily won the allegiance of thousands, often from tribes at enmity with those already Protestant. He understood the dynamics of Maori culture rather better than many of the Anglican and Wesleyan workers. However, he had little success in

persuading Maori converts to enter the priesthood, so that when he returned to France Catholic Maori lacked leadership. Some Marists were martyred – such as Chanel on Futuna, which later became a solidly Catholic community. More died from fever, especially in the Solomons, but French annexation of New Caledonia enabled them to win a significant following, both on the main island and more slowly in the Loyalty Islands.

The Marists also established small but significant churches in Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, despite strong resistance from Protestants, and became the church of the community on Wallis and Futuna, as well as in parts of the New Hebrides, where Presbyterians and the Anglican Melanesian mission had become established.

Expansion into Melanesia

All the churches had attempted to establish bases in Melanesia, but there had been more defeats than victories. The latter decades of the nineteenth century saw a fresh missionary impetus from both Protestants and Catholics. This was aided by both Polynesian missionaries and returnees from indentured labour in Queensland, who had been converted on the plantations. Churches were planted in the islands round New Guinea and Papua, in the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. The division of Papua and New Guinea between Britain and Germany in the 1880s brought additional varieties of Protestantism and Catholicism. Divine Word fathers came from Germany, Sacred Heart fathers from France and Germany; Lutheran missionaries came from Australia and Germany; Anglicans and Wesleyans from Australia. Other Sacred Heart fathers and sisters from France went to Papua, where the colonial authorities tried to maximize the impact of missions as civilizing agents by assigning them regions. Catholics refused to accept this, but the difficulties of mission-pioneering ensured that there was little overlap. Progress was slow, because of the variety of languages, the hostility of the people and the terrible toll exacted by the climate and by tropical diseases.

Slowly converts emerged. Schools, medical clinics, new technology and the powerful impact of the new religion gradually broke down resistance. Pacific Islander missionaries played an important role, for they understood village culture better than their European leaders. They undermined the authority of traditional religion by deliberately flouting taboos and insulting totemic creatures without incurring any punitive result. Their musical gifts were widely appreciated, whether they were

Protestant or Catholic. Church buildings might look European, but by the end of the First World War there were signs of growth both in numbers and in the vitality of Melanesian Christians. German missionaries in particular were fascinated by the cultures they encountered, and deliberately chose to enculturate rather than to destroy. The journal *Anthropos*, published by the Society of the Divine Word, contained many invaluable discussions of ethnography and language. Though the exploitative character of the colonial regimes was painfully obvious and some missionaries were seen as agents of punishment and repression, indigenous pastors and catechists were increasingly important in the expansion and consolidation of Christian communities.

Though they were culturally oral rather than literate, many Oceanic Christians had a deep insight into the sacred, experienced communally. They knew what it is to be delivered from the fear of evil powers into a world ordered by a loving creator. Simple prayers covering every aspect of life are part of their daily routine. Their identity is still shaped by their ties to tribal land and the places in that territory which speak especially of the sacred, both in church buildings and other sites. Dreams, visions and natural phenomena linked with totemic symbols still speak powerfully of the divine, as does the Christian sacramental world. For communities with a tradition of eating the bodies of their enemies to increase mana, the eucharist has a peculiarly powerful symbolism.

Maurice Leenhardt, a remarkable missionary anthropologist in New Caledonia in the early part of this century, was convinced that Melanesian Christians were still in touch with religious realities which had been lost in much European Christianity. Careful listening to pastors learned in the lore of their people gave him new insight into the structures of personhood, which in turn deeply influenced other French scholars. Leenhardt was also a formidable advocate for the Kanaks, showing them how to use the heritage of French law and democracy against the oppression of French settlers who wished to take the Kanaks' last land before they died out. Catholics and Protestants alike have drawn on that wisdom from oral tradition, which has recently been given literary form by Jean-Marie Tjibaou in *La présence Kanak*, before his tragic death.

After the 1940s – the third wave

The Second World War had a huge physical, spiritual and political impact on Pacific peoples, opening up new perspectives on regional

identity and leading to significant ecumenical co-operation. There are now more missionaries working in the region than in the nineteenth century. Many are self-appointed improvers from various sectarian groups, who have eroded the traditional churches' membership base. New religious movements have grown rapidly in some parts and hardly at all in others. Three groups have been especially influential – Mormons, Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists. In spite of their sectarian heritage, they have become a community church without the theology for the responsibilities that involves. Pentecostals have also become very significant numerically. Their style of piety has connected very powerfully with Melanesian aspirations, offering the drama of salvation in very accessible forms, especially for urban migrants. Miracles of power, healings, exorcisms, sin-sniffing, dancing in worship and ecstatic singing have spread far beyond Pentecostal groups into Evangelical and Catholic churches, creating forms of Christianity which are lay rather than clerically led.

Since the 1940s the large communities of the Highlands in Papua New Guinea have been pacified by the Australian Government and evangelized by a variety of groups. The resulting large churches are still very close to their primal religious heritage. Serious conflicts have occurred about the extent to which traditional culture can be incorporated in Christian belief and practice. Fighting is still a potent memory, gender roles are still influenced by pre-Christian patterns, with divisions about how to deal with polygamy. Ceremony is banned by some churches and affirmed by others.

Adjustment religions, a fascinating mix of Christianity and traditional religion, have been very influential in Melanesia, illustrating the ability of Melanesian Christians to adapt an imported faith to their own distinctive context. Various hypotheses have been offered, but the movements remain larger than the explanations of social scientists, who can only describe the search for supernatural power in this-worldly categories. Religion for them can only be a human construct and projection. Christians have rarely recognized that these so-called cargo cults, with their sometimes bizarre and magical elements, are more than pagan reversions. They are a sign of a dislocated spirituality in search of the transcendent. The Yali movement was one example of the inability of Christian leaders to do justice to the aspirations of the war hero Yali Sor, from the Rai Coast of New Guinea, and the desire of local Christians for recognition. Though he denounced cargo ideas in 1973, just before his death in 1975, his ideas on social reconstruction

caused great local excitement and considerable concern to the administration.

Inculturation – restating Christian spirituality

Attempts to restate Christian theology and spirituality in the context of local culture have been most successfully achieved by the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, founded by Catholic religious orders, but now ecumenical. In a wide variety of publications and seminars, they have attempted to introduce Christian workers to the rich variety of Melanesian cultures, as well as commonalities. Staff have argued that Christians must learn the language through which the divine has been regionally experienced for as long as 40,000 years, instead of expecting that European solutions to different cultural and theological problems will necessarily be the most valuable answers for Melanesia and Polynesia. The provision of biblical and liturgical translation in the region's myriad languages had been one of the most important ways of giving local Christians language in which to name their experience of God.

When the coming of Christianity has been so recent in many parts of Oceania, Christians of European and North American heritage need to recognize the length of time it has taken for Christianity to be inculturated in their own context. Space must be provided for local embodiments of Christianity to grow, to make mistakes and to experience Jesus as one of themselves. Only then can the coming of Christianity provide resources for an emergence of Christianity which is universal, and which transcends tribal and geographical boundaries, while at the same time being deeply rooted in the realities of life in micro-societies.

Much can be learned from the story thus far. An authentic and rich Christianity has emerged in the last two centuries. Its links with land, clan and the transcendent offer a fundamentally different discipleship from the individualist models of Western Christianity.

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The basic resource for understanding the region is John Garrett's three-volume history: *To live among the stars*, *Footsteps in the sea*, *Where nets were cast* (Suva, 1982–97). N. and S. Draper's

Daring to believe (Melbourne, 1990), is a fascinating collection of reflections on becoming Christian by Papua New Guineans. G. Trompf's *Melanesian religion* (Melbourne, 1991) offers a comprehensive academic analysis.