

THE RISE OF THE 19TH-CENTURY TONGAN AND FIJIAN MISSIONARY MOVEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Deep Sea Canoe*, Alan Tippett discusses the expansion of Christianity in the South Pacific. This book highlights the role of the Islanders, themselves, in carrying the gospel across the Pacific. Through my reading of this book, and through my teaching of History of Missions courses in Papua New Guinea, I came to see the story of missions in the South Pacific during the 19th and early 20th centuries as forerunners of the so-called Third-World Missions movement.

This article investigates the movement of Pacific Island missionaries. More specifically, it discusses the conversion of Tonga and Fiji, and the missionary outreach of the Wesleyan churches of these two island groups. In order to do this, it will be helpful to briefly review the story of the expansion of Wesleyanism in these islands, emphasising the contribution of the island missionaries, and then do an analysis of this expansion.

THE EXPANSION OF WESLEYAN CHRISTIANITY INTO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

ROOTS IN EVANGELICAL REVIVAL

The British Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society was founded in 1817, although the Wesleyans had been active in mission outside Britain for more than 20 years prior to this (Latourette, 1975, p. 1033). As with all the Protestant societies formed in this period, it owed a great debt to William Carey's recovery of a missionary structure for

Protestantism, to the Evangelical Revival of the mid-18th century, and also to the revival in Britain of 1792 (Orr, 1981, p. 11).

THE WESLEYAN MISSION TO TONGA

The London Missionary Society had been in the Pacific for 25 years, when the Wesleyans arrived. The first LMS mission to the Pacific had placed missionaries on Tahiti, Tonga, and the Marquesas Islands in 1797, but, as the latter two situations proved to be unreceptive, they were abandoned. By 1822, the peoples of Tahiti and the Society Islands had turned to Christ, in a series of people movements, and under the visionary leadership of John Williams, the mission and the young churches were beginning to move westwards across the Pacific.

British interest in Tonga was revived in 1817, with the publication of *Tonga Islands*, in which William Mariner, a British seafarer, described the ferocity of the Tongans, and advocated that the name of the islands be changed from the Friendly Islands to Tonga. Commercial interests, disturbed by the Tongan threat to their shipping, issued a call that Protestant missions not overlook these islands (Tippett, 1971, p. 77).

The first Wesleyan missionary, Walter Lawry, reached Tonga in 1822. However, after 14 months, he returned to Australia, disillusioned. Two years later, John Thomas was appointed. He and his party reached Nuku'alofa to find two Tahitian missionaries (referred to at the time as “native teachers”) already there. The Tahitians had been placed there two months previously. In that time, they had found a chiefly sponsor, and had 240 Tongans attending Christian worship, although none had been converted. The two groups worked together until 1830, when a comity agreement was made with LMS, which left Tonga and Fiji to the Wesleyans, and Samoa to LMS.

The Wesleyan missionaries adopted two principles that proved to be the keys to their success. Firstly, they placed their personnel where there was receptivity to their message, and relocated missionaries, when it became clear that a chief and his people were resistant. Secondly, they used suitable young converts, as missionaries, to reach other receptive peoples in the island chain. One of these was Peter Vi. Through his

ministry, the first power encounter took place. Peter Vi had been accepted by the chief Taufa'ahau as his "teacher". Eventually the chief reached the point of commitment to Christ, and demonstrated his new allegiance by entering the pagan temple, and clubbing the priestess with a club made from a banana tree, as she was drinking ceremonial kava under possession (Tippett, *ibid.*, p. 81). Subsequently, the people, under Taufa'ahau, also turned to Christ. Taufa'ahau then set about winning his relations further afield to Christ. This pattern of chiefly conversion, and power-encounter, was typical throughout Tonga.

In 1833, a young man, who was to become one of Tonga's greatest missionaries to Fiji, Joeli Bulu, was converted. In his autobiography, he tells of his initial antagonism to the *lotu* (the Tongan term for Christianity). Then he relates how, one day, he heard how the *lotu* promised a land of the dead in the sky, and how, shortly after, one cloudless night, he looked up to the stars, and felt his soul within longing for that beautiful land. Then and there, he made his decision, "I will *lotu*, that I may live among the stars" (Tippett and Kanailagi, 1976, p. 30). Bulu's conversion came on the eve of a great revival and awakening in Tonga.¹

THE TONGAN AWAKENING

This movement of the Holy Spirit was similar, in many respects, to the revival under Wesley in Britain, a century earlier. One of the missionaries described the scenes at his station in these words:

Oh what a solemn, but joyful sight! One thousand or more individuals bowed before the Lord, weeping at the feet of Jesus, and praying in agony of soul. I never saw such distress, never heard such cries for mercy, or such confessions of sin before. These things were universal, from the greatest chiefs in the land, to the meanest of the people (Latukeyu, 1974, p. 71).

¹ I follow Orr here in using "revival" to mean a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church, and "awakening" to refer to a large-scale turning to Christ among non-Christians (Orr, 1981, pp. ivff).

This revival resulted, firstly, in great numerical church growth: 9,000 people became full members of the church in six years (Orr, 1976, p. 29). Secondly, it resulted in significant cultural changes. According to Tippett, polygamy disappeared “overnight”, slaves were freed, and traditional chiefly enemies were reconciled (Tippett, 1971, pp. 95ff).²

Thirdly, and most significantly, for this study, it produced a Tongan missionary thrust to Fiji. Both the European missionaries and the Tongan church became concerned for Fiji. Prayer was focused on Fiji, and there were calls for missionary service in Fiji. In 1834, the Friendly Islands District Meeting of the Methodist church formally decided on a mission to Fiji. It is likely that this decision was made by Europeans, however, Tippett records that, by 1836, Tongan auxiliary missionary societies had been established in two centres, to support the Tongan mission to Fiji (*ibid.*, p. 100).

THE TONGAN MISSION TO FIJI

Tippett points out that there were two important contextual factors in the coming of the gospel to Fiji from Tonga (Tippett, 1967, pp. 5-13). In the first place, there had been considerable migration of Tongans to the eastern islands of Fiji, resulting in both small Tongan populations, and mixed Fijian-Tongan people (Tongaviti). Many of the men of these groups were mercenary plunderers, who served Fijian chiefs. The second factor was the long-standing trade contacts between the two island groups. These two factors proved to be the “bridge”, across which the gospel passed from Tonga to Fiji.

The first converts in Fiji were from among the Tongan settlers. Tippett records that, within 19 days of the arrival of the first missionary party, a Tongan, of chiefly rank, and about 50 of his people became Christians. A Fijian, of chiefly rank, Josua Mateinaniu, who had been converted in Tonga, was sent back to Fiji, by the church, to explore the places, where Tongans and Tongaviti people lived, with a view to finding

² One critical cultural feature, which was not transformed, was autocratic leadership. This was to be a “fatal flaw” in the church’s later development, leading to schism and other problems. See Connan, 1985.

receptive peoples. Less than 12 months later, as a result of his witness, 300 of them had turned to Christ. Many Tongan converts from Fiji returned to Tonga, after turning away from their plundering and lawlessness. Some of them became missionaries to the Fijians.

THE TONGAN MISSIONARIES

The story of Joeli Bulu is significant, for what it suggests of the spiritual quality of a Pacific island missionary. No doubt, there were many others like him. In his autobiography, he tells of his call to missionary service in Fiji.

One day . . . there met me in the path a man, who told me that the word of the missionaries in Fiji had come to Tonga, begging for teachers to help them in the work of God; and, while he was yet speaking, my soul burned within me, and a great longing sprang up in my heart to go away to that land and declare the glad tidings of salvation to the people that knew not God (Tippet and Kanailagi, p. 11).

Bulu goes on to record how, when he approached a missionary, to tell him of his conviction, even before he could get the words out, the missionary told him that he felt that he should be one of the men the church should send to Fiji. Bulu gave the rest of his life to Fiji. His life was in danger several times from pagan chiefs, who were set against the *lotu*. More than once, he was miraculously saved from death. After nearly 20 years of missionary work, he was ordained as the first Native Assistant Missionary. He was a church planter and pastor, who worked in many parts of Fiji. When the mission was unable to supply him with workers, he trained some of his converts to work alongside him.

Another great missionary to Fiji was James Havea. Something of his deep faith comes through, in his description of his conversation aboard a boat, during a dramatic battle with a storm:

When the waves were big and terrifying, they asked me that night . . . if I thought they might die. My reply was that nothing was difficult for God, if it was His will that they live a little

longer on this earth, for there were plenty of places, where He could take us. But if, on the other hand, it was His will that we should enter that place, where there was neither wind nor wave, then we ought, right now, to consider our lives and our sailing, whether our prows be headed straight for life eternal, or whether we be drifting away to destruction (Tippett, 1954, p. 22).

Tippett's comment is apt, when he says that these men "had found a faith adequate to their experience" (*ibid.*).

AWAKENINGS IN FIJI

1835 marks the beginning of Wesleyan mission work in Fiji. But these islands were not won with the same speed as Tonga. After 40 years, still many of the people groups in the mountains of the two major islands had not yet turned to the new faith. A major reason for this slower pace was that there was greater cultural diversity in Fiji than in Tonga. In the first place, there were seven quite evenly-balanced, rival kingdoms, frequently at war with one another (Tippett, 1967, p. 38). There were differences in social structure, and dialect, to name two further factors. The conversion of Fiji was accomplished over a period of more than 40 years. Indeed, it was necessary that a separate people movement be sparked off in each group in Fiji. But, as in Tonga, an important characteristic of the growth of the church in Fiji was the role of revival-awakenings. A significant difference was that, unlike Tonga, in Fiji, the revivals were localised, another difference stemming from the differing social structure.

Both Tippett and Orr (whose account is largely dependent on Tippett) chronicle some of these awakenings, and characterise them as Pentecostal, in the sense of manifesting similar phenomena to outpourings of the Holy Spirit, recorded in the book of Acts (Orr, 1976, pp. 36ff, Tippett, 1967, pp. 42ff). Tippett gives evidence that the Fijians, themselves, came to this conclusion, apart from missionary instruction (*ibid.*, p. 62). The evidence shows that these revivals sprang from preaching, prayer, and the singing of salvation hymns. Many centres experienced revival-awakenings, after a small number had already turned to Christ, and entered the church.

The missionary, Hunt, recorded the scenes that took place on the island of Viwa:

Some of the worst cannibals in Fiji were suddenly seized with the most powerful conviction. . . . They wept and wailed most piteously; and some were so agitated as to require several men to prevent them doing themselves, and others, bodily harm. . . . What some of them had long heard, without much apparent effect, was now of the greatest use (Tippett, 1954, p. 29).

The awakenings came as a breakthrough, leading to rapid church growth in each area. On the island of Ono, an important result was that many men offered to go with the gospel to other parts of Fiji, which were still in the grip of paganism and cannibalism.

Another important aspect, in the growth of the first-generation church in Fiji, was persecution. The conversion of most of the high chiefs did not come until after the church was already well established. Indeed, when, finally, the most powerful chief, Cakombau, did finally embrace Christianity, in 1854, persecution continued, because he yet had many non-Christian enemies. For the first 35 years of the church in Fiji, many Christian communities experienced severe opposition.

There were times, when whole villages were suddenly attacked and destroyed, the men killed and eaten, and the women and children carried off as slaves. . . . No estimate could possibly be made of the numbers of Christians massacred, eaten, enslaved, or killed . . . and, in my own reading, I have known the figure to stand at many thousands (*ibid.*, p. 33).

Through the experience of revival, most of these first-generation Fijian Christians developed a strong faith, which was prepared to trust God, even in the face of a cruel death.

THE FIJIAN MISSION TO NEW BRITAIN

Before the gospel had been received in the mountainous interior, the Fijian church had already begun to develop a missionary concern for

the islands of Melanesia, further to the west (Tippett, 1967, p. 199). By 1874, an agreement had been reached with the Australian Wesleyan Mission, that Australia would supply the material resources, but Fiji would supply the personnel, who would work under the supervision of George Brown, an experienced missionary, who had served in Samoa. The new mission would enter New Britain, and the adjacent islands (now part of Papua New Guinea).

In Fiji, the Wesleyan mission, and the Fijian church, had been preparing a group of Fijians, to pioneer, with Revd George Brown in New Britain. However, 1875 saw a catastrophic measles epidemic sweep across Fiji, claiming 40,000 lives, including many of the recruits for New Britain, as well as numerous pastors and teachers. George Brown arrived in Fiji, feeling rather uncertain about the wisdom of recruiting other young men, when it was clear that they were desperately needed in Fiji. However, he met with the students at the church's training institution, and placed the challenge before them, giving them a deliberately-dark picture of New Britain. According to Brown:

Many of them were pale and haggard from the ravages of the terrible epidemic, through which they had passed. I stood up, and can honestly say, today, that not one thing was hidden from them. . . . I told them of the ferocity of the natives; of the unhealthy character of the climate . . . that, in all probability, many of them would never see their own Fijian homes again (Burton, 1949, p. 90).

The following morning, every one of the 83 men volunteered to go with Brown to New Britain. Six married, and three single, men were chosen. But, when the British Administrator heard of the plan, he was concerned that the volunteers either had been persuaded against their wills, or that they had not been appraised of the risks. Government officials interviewed each of the volunteers. Finally, the leader of the group, Aminio Baledrokadroka, spoke up, "Sir, we have fully considered this matter in our hearts, no one has pressed us in any way; we have given ourselves up to do God's work, and our mind today sir,

is to go with Mr Brown. If we die, we die, if we live, we live” (Burton, 1949, p. 94).

Within three years, most of them were dead. A powerful New Britain pagan chief massacred three of them, and some died of malaria. But, there was no shortage of Fijians, who were ready to take their place. So, the church was established among the peoples of New Britain.

In 1891, the Methodists began work in eastern Papua, and again, the Fijian church sent missionaries to work alongside Europeans, and other Pacific Islanders. By the mid-1950s, more than 300 Fijians had been sent out as cross-cultural missionaries, the majority to other islands of the Pacific. And still, today, some continue to serve in Papua New Guinea.

ANALYSIS OF WESLEYAN EXPANSION

I will now analyse this story, using several of the perspectives of four of Pierson’s eight major theses of the history of the expansion of the Christian movement (see appendix for explanatory statements of these theses). My purpose is to focus on the missionary movement of the island churches of Tonga and Fiji, rather than on the European movement. I have, chosen only four of the eight theses, because it seems to me that only four of them are directly applicable to our story. The primary reason for the inapplicability of four of the theses is that these missionary movements were inextricably linked with the European missionary enterprise.

THE TWO-STRUCTURES THESIS

In essence, this thesis states that, throughout history, God has normally used two structures (the congregational and the mission), as part of His redemptive mission.

Firstly, it is clear that, in these islands, the Wesleyan mission structure of Britain planted a congregational structure. But, for two reasons, it is difficult to analyse the Tongan and Fijian mission movements, from the perspective of this thesis. In the first place, for the most part, the Pacific Islander missionaries worked under the supervision of the

Europeans, and, secondly, because of the lack of data. However, it is clear that the Tongan church organised some kind of mission structure, which Tippett refers to as “auxiliary missionary societies” (Tippett, 1971, p. 100). But the function of these societies would seem to have been limited to material support for the Tongan mission. The evidence would also suggest that the Europeans controlled the distribution of this support (Connan, 1985, p. 47). The Tongan missionaries (who were not dignified with that title) were really a servant-like addition to the European mission structure, having no formal place in the decision-making machinery. Further research on these auxiliary societies is necessary.

On the other hand, it must also be pointed out here that there was considerable Tongan missionary activity, which went on, apart from this structure. Here, I refer to the unprogrammed witness of those Tongans, who had trading and other social contacts with Fijians. But this was more the natural witness of members of a congregational structure. How much of the conversion of Fiji depended on this form of witness is not known. In passing, it may be noted that this parallels the most-common form of missionary outreach in the early church (Green, 1970, pp. 172ff).

I have not found any evidence of a separate mission structure of the church in Fiji, as it pursued its mission to New Britain. Further research may uncover the existence of societies, similar to those in the Tongan church. As with the Tongan mission to Fiji, the Fijians came under the umbrella of the European mission structure, albeit, as second-class members.

Given this situation of European dominance, there was hardly a functional need for separate Tongan and Fijian structures, though, in retrospect, it may have been desirable, from the point of view of the development of a sense of selfhood by these churches, as well as for the process of indigenisation.

THE THEOLOGICAL-BREAKTHROUGH THESIS

This thesis states that every new expansion . . . has been accompanied by new understandings of the gospel (Pierson, 1985). The evidence does not allow one to distinguish clearly between European and Tongan motivation to engage in mission to Fiji. Nevertheless, it may be stated with certainty that the first generation of Tongan converts saw, clearly, their responsibility to share the good news with their neighbours.

It could be argued that, in a first-generation situation, such as this, it is inappropriate to speak of theological breakthroughs, since, by Pierson's definition, the thesis refers to "new understandings of some aspect of the gospel", which suggests that it applies best to a new expansion from a church, which has been established for some time, has settled down, and then subsequently developed a missionary vision and movement. In the case of Tonga, it is legitimate to speak of a missionary orientation, from the church's inception. The reason for this is related to the third thesis (see below).

The Fijian church began its missionary movement towards the end of the first generation, and into the second generation of converts. However, in making this statement, it must be remembered that, in 1875, there were many parts of Fiji, where first-generation Christianity was still being established, or was still quite young. Again, it is difficult to speak of theological breakthroughs in this situation, unless the term is widened to refer to breakthroughs from the theology of traditional religion. In the case of the Tongans, relationships with Fiji were long-standing. It did not require a major reorientation of the Tongan's thinking for them to take the gospel to Fiji. But, the situation, with respect to Fiji and New Britain, was completely different. The Fijians had no relationship of any kind with these people. Moreover, they had come from a non-missionary tradition. So, from this perspective, it may be said that, in the process of conversion to Wesleyan Christianity, Fijians experienced a theological breakthrough (which was a major paradigm shift), concerning their responsibility to take the good news of the message of their new God to other, unrelated peoples. It is also probable that the experience of opposition and

persecution from near neighbours of the young Fijian church enhanced the development of this breakthrough.

To summarise, the Tongan and Fijian missionary movements were, from one point of view, an extension of the European movement into the Pacific, and, as such, operated from the same theological foundations. Yet, they were more than this. They had their own inner dynamic. The peculiar combination of European dominance, and a first-generation church, engaging in cross-cultural mission, requires that this thesis be modified to include worldview paradigm shifts that would probably not normally be classed as a theological breakthrough.

SPIRITUAL-DYNAMIC THESIS

This thesis “seeks to describe the underlying causes of the spiritual dynamic of expansion or renewal movements” (*ibid.*).

In both the Tongan and the Fijian missions, it is clear that the underlying spiritual dynamic was a deep conviction of sin, and an experience of the love of God. Joeli Bulu records that, after he began following the Christian way, he went through a period of deep conviction of sin, but could find no rest. His account of the day he found assurance is as follows:

While I listened eagerly to his words (a missionary), telling of the love of Christ to him, my eyes were opened. I saw the way; and I, even I also, believed and loved. . . . My heart was full of joy and love, and the tears streamed down my cheeks. Often had I wept before: but, not like my former weeping, were the tears I now shed. Then, I wept out of sorrow and fear, but now for very joy and gladness, and because my heart was full of love to Him, who had loved me, and given Himself for me (Tippett and Kanailagi, 1976, p. 8).

An account of his missionary call immediately follows this incident. Tongan missionary consciousness was born in revival. Faith response to the proclamation of the saving and sacrificial work of Christ brought forth an experience of the love of Christ within, and this became the

motivating force for mission. A further factor, no doubt, was an experience of the power of God, as demonstrated in numerous power encounters. The Tongan church had come to know the Christian God as the all-powerful living God, who sets people free, not only from sin, but also from fear.

In Fiji, revival-awakening was, similarly, the spiritual dynamic for mission. The 83 men at the training college, who responded to Brown's call, did so out of deep love for Christ, and the desire to see His kingdom extended. Long before, the foundations for a strong missionary tradition had been laid in the revivals that produced men, who were willing to take the gospel to enemy groups. The mission to New Britain was an extension of this impulse.

CLIMACTIC CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS

In discussing the planting of the church in Tonga, it is clear that contextual conditions were not as favourable, in 1797, as they were in the mid-1820s, for the spread and acceptance of the gospel. One of the key differences was warfare. Three of the original 10 LMS missionaries to Tonga lost their lives – victims of a civil war that swept through the village they had settled in. Tippett comments that the first two decades of the 19th century in Tonga were marked by civil war, throughout the islands (Tippett, 1971, p. 76). However, by the mid-1820s, several Tongan chiefs were competing with each other for the prestige and trade benefits they saw in having a missionary among them.

The missionary movement, from the Tongan church to Fiji, was shaped by the nature of the traditional relationships that existed between the two island groups. As discussed earlier, there was both migration and settlement of Tongans in Fiji, as well as trading relationships. The first converts in Fiji, therefore, were Tongans, followed by Fijian peoples, who lived on the islands with the greatest contact with Tonga. So, the primary factors, here, are geographic, and similarity of culture.

In relation to the Fijian mission to New Britain, geography is not a factor (New Britain is more than 2,000 kilometres from Fiji), but

cultural similarity is relevant. Although Fijian culture has many similarities to Polynesian culture, nevertheless, anthropologists broadly classify it as Melanesian. Of all the Christians in the world in 1875, the Fijians were the best suited, culturally, to take the gospel to New Britain.

CONCLUSION AND MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The sweep of the gospel across the Pacific would never have been accomplished with the speed and effectiveness with which it was without the work of the Pacific islands missionaries. However, European colonial mentality prevented any realistic acknowledgment of their role and significance, throughout the 19th, and the first half of the 20th centuries. This study has focused on the 19th-century missions from Tonga and Fiji. It is now clear that, although the Fijian and Tongan missionaries were sent out, and worked under European structures and authority, nevertheless, it is appropriate to see them as representatives of genuine mission movements of the Tongan and Fijian churches. In both cases, a vision and commitment to mission grew out of a deep sense of the love and grace of God to sinners, which was experienced, especially, in dramatic renewal movements. The pattern on Tonga and Fiji was similar to that which produced the European Protestant missionary movement. In addition, there are clear indications of the providence of God, in the presence of certain climactic, contextual conditions aligning with the preparation of these young churches for engagement in mission.

The churches of the Pacific must recapture this rich heritage of mission, in order to share in the unfinished task of evangelising the world. Local renewal-revivals are occasioned throughout PNG, and history teaches that these are signs that God is calling His people in PNG to new engagements in cross-cultural mission. Mission is as much the responsibility of the Papua New Guinean church as it is of the church in the West

This study sharply raises the issue of partnership in mission. In the first place, it is likely that, as more Papua New Guineans engage in cross-cultural mission, many of them will work, either with, or alongside,

Western agencies. The 19th-century Tongan and Fijian missionaries-in-“partnership” with the British and Australian Wesleyan missions were characterised by a high degree of paternalism. Will the Western mission agencies, with which Papua New Guineans will be linked, be free of paternalism? Will Papua New Guinean perspectives, regarding, for example, missionary methods, missionary lifestyle and standard of living, be taken seriously, or accepted? And what of the issues of finance? How far is it legitimate for the church in the West to support Papua New Guinean missionaries? These are some of the issues that must be faced.

A second issue is that of missionary training. The early Tongan and Fijian missionaries had minimal training. The fact that they were communicating the gospel to peoples of a similar culture to themselves was an important factor in their success. But today’s missionaries from the Pacific are unlikely to have this advantage. Training will be critical. The leaders of the burgeoning missions movement in PNG must continue to deal with this question.

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