

DISTINGUISHING THE RELIGION OF OUR PRE-CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS FROM THE RELIGION OF THE MISSIONARIES

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INTRODUCTION

Lotu is the term widely used in the Pacific for “religion”. One of the 19th-century missionaries to Tonga, Revd Dr James Egan Moulton (1841-1909), defined *lotu* as “humanity’s proper duty to God their Maker”. He further explains that this “proper duty” has two essential elements, namely, faith and practice. Faith is the content of the believer’s belief, as it has been shaped by the Bible, and practice is the believer’s lifestyle, as an embodiment of that faith.

Here in the Pacific, there has emerged a view that the missionaries, who came to the Pacific in the 19th century, did not bring the gospel message with them. Rather, the God of the missionaries was already worshipped by our pre-Christian ancestors here in the Pacific. The underlying conviction is that the gods, which our pre-Christian ancestors worshipped, whether it was a shark, a tree, and so forth, were cultural expressions of the God the missionaries brought to the Pacific.

WERE OUR PRE-CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS WORSHIPPING THE GOD OF THE BIBLE?

This claim is only half true. Like all half-truths, it is very convincing, at face value, but very dangerous when it becomes foundational for making sense of the world in which we live. Of course, our ancestors were religious. They were worshippers of some kind of deity, or deities. In fact, when the missionaries first arrived in Tonga in 1797, they found religious

shrines, devoted to various deities, scattered throughout the country. But were our pre-Christian ancestors worshipping the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through their shrines?

If the Bible were to be our sole authority in matters of faith and practice, we must firmly respond in the negative to this question. For, even though our ancestors were religious, and were already observing various forms of religious rites, and so forth, they were not, in any reasonable sense, worshipping the God of the Bible, the God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One surveys in vain the Tongan pre-Christian pantheon for a deity that palely reflects the God of the Bible, in His personality and character.

William Mariner, who lived in Tonga in the opening decades of the 19th century, has documented the deities of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors, and none of those listed represented anything close to what one finds in the Bible.¹ Moreover, the way our pre-Christian ancestors worshipped these deities, as described by Mariner, was very impersonal. Accordingly, pre-Christian Tongans looked to their deities to help them cope with situations beyond the grasp of their physical senses. So, for example, when someone, especially from the chiefly families, was sick, human sacrifice became a desperate attempt to please their deities, and procure healing. Most incidents of human sacrifice, recorded in Mariner's account, did not result in the restoration of the patient.

In the Bible, we find that human sacrifices were not demanded by the God of the Bible. Abraham, of course, was requested to sacrifice Isaac, his son, but we are clearly told in Gen 22 that this was to test him. Hence, Abraham's faith is shown in his willingness to do according to God's word. But this incident cannot be the basis of saying that human sacrifice was acceptable to God. In fact, when human sacrifice became official religious policy in Israel, under King Manasseh of Judah, it was one of the

¹ See J. Martin, *An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands in the South Pacific Ocean*, 2 vols, Edinburgh UK: Constable and Co., 1927, book I, chapter 18.

reasons why the wrath of God came upon Judah, in the form of the Babylonian exile.

In addition to that, the morality of our pre-Christian ancestors, as it is described in historical accounts from the time, can be closely identified with those of the pagan nations condemned in the Bible. Captain Cook, for example, told of the harsh measures, which his crew would implement, in order to prevent the Tongans from stealing things from his ship. Cook also told of how the Tongan ruler at the time, *Finau Ulukalala*, tested one of Cook's guns by shooting a Tongan man who was climbing on one of the ship's masts. When Cook confronted *Finau* about the killing as being murder, he was told that, as the king, he was entitled to do what he had just done.

What Cook failed to understand in that incident is that *Finau* was, indeed, entitled to such activities against humanity, in accordance with the underlying worldview of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors. In pre-Christian Tonga, it was held that those of chiefly and kingly origin were the only group born with a "soul". Hence, they were the only people entitled to enter *Pulotu*, the Tongan paradise, at their death. The rest of the population, the commoners, were regarded as "eaters-of-the-soil" (*kainangaefonua*), because they were born simply to "eat the dust" of the land. This kind of thinking seems to reflect the kind of oppression that was justifiable in pre-Christian Tongan society. It was probably seen as a way of maintaining the power of the chiefs, and thus preventing any thoughts of revolt from the common people. Hence, the biblical view of all human beings being treated equally before God their Maker had no place in the worldview of our pre-Christian Tongan ancestors.

The incidents, just described, are meant to help Tongan theologians to reconsider the view that has been more-recently popularised by some; that the gospel was already with us in the Pacific before the arrival of the missionaries in the 19th century. This view cannot be supported by historical evidence, and, even more so, in regard to the biblical statement of the gospel message. Paul the Apostle, "handed on" to believers "as of first importance" what he "in turn, had received" as the gospel message

from the risen Jesus and the 12 Apostles: “that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). There is absolutely nothing in Tongan cultural heritage that resembles, in any sense, this message of Christ crucified. Worse still, the view that the gospel was already in our possession, tends to overlook the significant changes brought about in our cultural worldview, as a result of the arrival of the biblical gospel, through the 19th-century missionaries.

This essay, of course, is not an attempt to justify the missionaries in all their activities in the Pacific, not the least in Tonga. Indeed, the Tongan church has been struggling with the issue of church division ever since the time of missionary activity here in Tonga – church divisions, not on a doctrinal basis, but on personal differences, as a result of the conflict between two 19th-century missionaries, Shirley Baker and James Egan Moulton. In spite of that, there is a pressing need for the church of God in Tonga, and the Pacific, to appreciate the 19th-century missionaries’ effort in bringing the gospel of Christ crucified to our people. Actually, this is an appeal to contemporary Pacific theologians to reconsider the history of Christian mission in the Pacific, critically considering their thinking, in the light of evidence – both historical and biblical.

Now, if our pre-Christian ancestors did not worship the God of the Bible, what were they worshipping? Here, we must turn to the biblical worldview to instruct us in thinking about the religion of our ancestors in the Pacific.

THE BIBLE’S VIEW OF RELIGION

The Bible tells us that God created the universe, and all that is in it, by His Word (Ps 33:6). Moreover, we are told that things created are meant to express the invisible, eternal, and divine qualities of God: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Ps 19:1). Creation itself, therefore, is God’s sermon to all of humanity about His own glory and power. Humanity is meant to look at creation, and know that there is a Creator God, simply by being confronted with what God made. This knowledge should then be expressed in gratitude and worship to Him (cf. Rom 1:21).

Since creation is declaring to us the eternal and divine invisible character of God, humanity is meant to gain their knowledge of God from it. For “since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:20). Because we can know God from creation, we are left with no excuse at all for being ignorant of Him. On judgment day, no one can defend themselves before God by saying that he or she did not have the opportunity to know Him. Creation functions to render creatures without excuse before God’s throne of judgment.² If God has made the knowledge of Himself readily available for us in creation, why is it then that we, as creatures, do not obtain a saving knowledge of Him from it?

The problem, according to the Bible, lies in human nature. The Bible tells us that we are, by nature, sinful, even at the point of conception in the womb (Ps 51:5). Jesus affirms that the human heart is an evil-manufacturing factory that makes us spiritually unclean, and unacceptable before God, and before our neighbours (Mark 7:23). Thus, according to the Bible, we are, by nature, sinful.

This sinful nature was not the state of humanity in creation. God created all things, and saw that it was “good”. It was the disobedience of Adam, however, that resulted in human nature being corrupted (Gen 3). The Bible contains God’s plan to reverse the effect of human sin, and to transform the kingdoms of this world to be the kingdom of His Christ. This plan has been fulfilled in Jesus, and will be consummated when Jesus returns (cf. Mark 1:14-15; Rev 11:15).

² In this sense, it would be helpful to distinguish the biblical view from the traditional Roman Catholic approach to natural theology, which is very open to the possibility of persons coming to know God truly from creation. [See documents of Vatican I (1870) Session III.] While it is true that a knowledge of God can be subjectively received from nature, its main function, according to Rom 1:19-21, is not to give humanity a saving knowledge of God. Saving knowledge can only be obtained from hearing the message of the gospel of Christ (Rom 10:17). See also K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II, 1; pp. 107-141.

SINNERS CANNOT AND DO NOT WANT TO KNOW GOD

The implication of the sinfulness of human nature suggests suppression of the true knowledge of God, which He has made available to us in creation (Rom 1:18). Ultimately, this suppression is expressed in idolatry. Having been informed by nature that there is a Creator, Paul says, we “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man, and birds, and animals, and reptiles” (Rom 1:23). As a result, we worship created things rather than the Creator Himself (Rom 1:25). In other words, humanity’s suppression of the knowledge of God is clearly expressed in the very practices of their various religious shrines. In that sense, religion is not a seeking after God’s glory, but rather a running away from God.³

This is the situation, in which the 19th-century Christian missionaries found our Tongan ancestors, when they arrived. Were our ancestors worshipping God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Absolutely not! Rather, they were worshipping creatures. *King Taufa’ahau*, the founder of modern Tonga, worshipped a shark as his god, for example.

Thus, it seems profoundly wrong to claim that our pre-Christian ancestors, here in the Pacific, were worshipping God – God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through their religious practices, before the arrival of the missionaries. One thing that is clear from the available historical evidence – they were not doing that.

THE LOTU (RELIGION) OF OUR ANCESTORS AND THE LOTU (RELIGION) OF THE 19TH-CENTURY MISSIONARIES

The observation that our ancestors were worshipping idols confirms that they were religious people. The term *lotu* (religion), which was eventually adopted by missionaries all over the Pacific, as the designation of the Christian faith, was used in the pre-Christian era as a name for idol

³ It is helpful to note that Christianity is not a “religion”. If all religions were to be humanity’s effort in seeking after God (and this is how the concept of religion is most popularly understood) then Christianity is not a religion, in that sense, since Christianity is God reaching out to mankind, in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, becoming a Christian involves turning away from religion “to serve the living God, and wait for His Son from heaven” (1 Thess 1:9-10).

worship. If our ancestors already had their own *lotu*, then what is the main difference between their *lotu* and the *lotu* that the 19th-century missionaries brought to our shores?

In one of the many hymns he composed for the Methodist church in Tonga, Moulton says that, when the missionaries arrived in Tonga, the natives heard the “preaching” of the Bible, and, as a result, they turned to the living God (391 *Tongan Hymn Book*):

*He na'e tu'u ki ai 'a e lotu
Omi 'a e kau faifekau
'O fanongo 'e he motu
ki he me'a 'a e Tohitapu
'O takofi 'a e hou 'eiki mo e Hau*

The idea of this verse can be expressed in English, as follows:

*Christianity [lotu] came to Tonga;
Through the missionaries;
And [all the people of] the island heard;
The message of scripture;
[As a result] The king and the nobles repented.*

What is interesting to note from this verse is the conviction, at least of one of the missionaries, that the conversion of Tongans was brought about by the Bible. True, the missionaries came to Tonga to evangelise the natives. But it was the Bible that accomplished that noble aim on their behalf. In other words, the Bible was the “missionary” that brought Christianity – the new *lotu* – to Tonga, and not any of the missionaries. It was through the *preaching of the Bible* by the missionaries that our ancestors turned from their native deities to embrace Christianity. This, indeed, is the pattern of Christian missionary activities since New Testament times. For example, even though it was Paul’s associate, Epaphras, who evangelised the Colossians, Paul described the preaching activities of Epaphras as the coming of the “word of truth, the gospel” to the Colossians (Col 1:6).

This is how the *lotu* (religion) of our pre-Christian ancestors, and that of the missionaries, can be distinguished. The *lotu* of the missionaries was, as Moulton named it, *lotu tohitapu* or *biblical Christianity*. It is the *lotu*, in which scripture holds the authority to determine what must be believed, and what must be practised. In other words, the missionaries brought the *lotu* (religion) in which the *tohitapu* (scriptures) defined what ought to be believed, as well as what ought to be practised. The term *lotu tohitapu* (biblical Christianity) occurs twice in Moulton's *Tongan Hymn Book* (Hymns 449; 538 THB). This term (*lotu tohitapu*) not only captures the idea of the *lotu* (Christianity) the missionaries brought to the Pacific, it also distinguishes their *lotu* from our ancestors' *lotu*.

The missionaries' *lotu* is a specific type of religion. It is the Christianity of the New Testament. It is a form of Christianity, in which the Bible determines what we must believe, and how we must express that belief in practice. This type of Christianity is traditionally known as *evangelicalism* (*lotu tohitapu*). Although there are different types of evangelicalism today, its true nature is seen in those, whose faith and practice are confined to what the Bible says. To be confined to what the Bible says, in matters of faith and practice, does not rule out the application of the critical apparatus of exegesis to the biblical text. But such an undertaking is carried out with the conviction that the biblical text should be allowed to transform the reader's worldview.

In the past, evangelicalism was neglected, and almost became a forgotten "branch" of Christianity. Today, however, the tide has turned, and evangelicalism has become fashionable in Christian circles. However, there are many different forms of evangelicalism today. One can even now speak of "evangelical Catholics" and "liberal evangelicals", which, a generation ago, would have been understood as a contradiction in terms. However, the kind of evangelicalism that the 19th-century missionaries brought to Tonga, as it is expressed in written documentation, is an evangelicalism which is true to its traditional sense.

In actual fact, evangelicals derive their name from the Greek expression εὐαγγέλιον = *euaggelion*, which means "gospel" or "good news". The

term “evangelical”, as it has been used for centuries, is shorthand for *gospel-centred Christianity* – “that is, Christianity that puts its whole-hearted trust in God’s word; which accepts and loves the ancient gospel of Christ’s atoning death and glorious resurrection; which sees Christian discipleship as a matter of everyday commitment”.⁴ In other words, in its biblical sense, evangelicalism is “the church returning to basics; it is the church returning to the purest and simplest form of the gospel; it is the church at its straightforward best”.⁵

If Jesus’ life, as depicted by the gospels, was lived, at every point, in fulfilment of the scriptures, then the Christianity, whose teaching and practice are restricted to what the Bible says, is the most Christ-like form of Christianity. This is the kind of *lotu* brought to our shores by the 19th-century missionaries, as described in the available historical evidence.

CONCLUSION

Hence, we may conclude that evangelicalism, or *lotu tohitapu*, in its most traditional and biblical sense, was the *lotu* that the 19th-century missionaries brought to Tonga. Our pre-Christian ancestors only had *lotu*, but it was a form of worship that was idolatry, which cannot be identified in any way with the message of biblical Christianity, proclaimed to them by the missionaries, the message of Christ crucified. Otherwise, they would not have received the gospel proclaimed by the missionaries, which actually gave them a sense of belonging, and made sense of their surroundings.

⁴ See P. D. Jensen, and T. Payne, *Have Evangelicals Lost Their Way?: and other . . . Stuff*, Homebush West NSW: Lancer Books, 1991, p. 8.

⁵ See Jensen and Payne, *Evangelicals*, p. 42.