**Christianity in Oceania**

Today about two out of three inhabitants of Oceania–which includes the more secularized and diverse Australia and New Zealand, as well as Fiji with its large Hindu population–call themselves Christians. This 65 percent is high when compared with other parts of the world in which Christianity has been an heirloom for a millennium or two. In parts of old Christendom today, the “nones” (i.e., those not affiliated with any religion) outnumber most of the denominations, sometimes all of them combined. Christianity, then, appears to be flourishing in Oceania, even as the number of adherents declines in many other parts of the world.

By comparison with Europe and much of Asia, Christianity is a late arrival in Oceania. Mission activity in Oceania began in the late seventeenth century with the arrival of Catholic priests in the Mariana Islands, more than a century after the Philippines. Near the end of the eighteenth century the London Missionary Society (LMS) brought a band of missionaries to Tahiti, but it was in the nineteenth century that Christianity really spread throughout the region. In the 1820s Methodists began work in Tonga and Samoa, while LMS expanded its field to include Fiji and the Cook Islands. Catholic priests soon afterward began work in the central Pacific, often encountering resistance in those islands already reached by other churches and so settling into hitherto neglected areas.

Australia, the site of an English penal colony founded in 1788, drew its earliest missionaries to serve those European settlers. Only 30 years later did the missionaries extend their work to the local people who had been residing there for 50,000 years; but it was another century before substantial numbers converted to Christianity. New Zealand, despite its fearsome reputation, proved to be a far easier field for conversions. Catholic, Wesleyan and Anglican missions were launched at the start of the nineteenth century, and by 1840 most of the Maori population had been baptised.

By mid-nineteenth century, great swaths of Oceania had been introduced to Christianity. Even so, two large areas remained unevangelized: Micronesia (apart from the Marianas) and most of Melanesia. ABCFM missionaries established the church in the eastern part of Micronesia, including the Marshalls and Kiribati, in the 1850s, with Catholics beginning work throughout the islands a few decades later, and German evangelical missionaries reaching Yap and Palau in the early 1900s. Melanesia, on the other hand, had been the target of many earlier missionary groups, nearly all of whom had to abandon their mission. At first only New Caledonia had a solid church. Anglicans and Presbyterians later were able to establish a lasting presence in the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. Finally, a successful mission was launched in Papua New Guinea in the 1870s. There, as in Tuvalu and other places evangelized later in the century, islanders themselves were instrumental in introducing the people to Christianity.

In the earliest stages of its introduction in Oceania, Christianity was supported by strong colonial presence. This tight linkage between the political and the religious overhaul of the island systems is clear in many cases. But as churches became established throughout many of the islands, the appeal of Christianity itself became a notable factor in conversion. Adopting the new religion was less a matter of appeasing foreign powers than choosing a path of life because of its intrinsic appeal.

*Early Impact of Christianity*

We don’t have to look very hard to find unmistakable signs of the impact of Christianity on island culture. Clothing is one striking example, since early Christians could usually be identified by their dress if nothing else. Many of the practices that missionaries branded as “heathenish”–such as use of kava, veneration of ancestral spirits, bodily tattooing, and certain types of dancing–were forbidden. In Fiji, as in Papua New Guinea, cannibalism was ended with the conversion to Christianity. Indeed, the wooden fork for “long pig” (as human flesh was known) once used by the leading chief in Fiji is still on display in the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts.

One immediate effect of Christianity nearly everywhere was the cessation of traditional warfare. People in Chuuk would recount with wonder that their Congregational pastor had only to walk onto the battlefield with his familiar black umbrella to bring about a cessation of hostilities. But the effect of the new religion was much greater than this. Christianity extended the lines of kinship well beyond clan ties to include fellow believers in other distant villages and islands. All these were regarded as protected from any hostile action; they were to be treated as fellow clan members. Yet, in a few cases, especially in parts of Papua New Guinea and Kiribati, the difference in denomination later became a battleground of its own.

Formal education was another hallmark of Christianity. In most parts of the Pacific schools were introduced by missionaries, and education was strongly stamped by Christianity. Literacy was an essential in the schools so that students would be able to read the bible. Over the years Christian schools have continued to operate, even as the public school system has grown up alongside these schools. The church today does not have the monopoly on education that it once had, but in many places Christian schools continue to be highly regarded for their quality.

Medicine and health services also originated with Christian missionaries in most places, often in response to an epidemic brought on by contact with Westerners. Such was the case on Pohnpei, where the Congregational mission personnel provided the medicine and the care so important in quelling the deadly smallpox epidemic that broke out just a few years after their arrival. In recent times, too, church groups have provided critical medical aid, although health services have been largely incorporated into the government system today.

*Place of Christianity in Island Life*

Christianity may have been a late arrival, one introduced from the West, but it cannot be regarded merely as an appendage stitched onto island society. It is fair to say that Christianity has truly permeated island society, reaching deep into its bloodstream.

Churches are to be found everywhere in the islands, even in the remote atolls. But that’s only part of the story. The church has also become a significant part of the social landscape of the islands. In many places it is the dominant institution in the daily life of the people. The church calendar regulates much of the life of villagers; its choirs perform at community events; its pastors call down blessings at the onset of projects and the dedication of buildings; its policies are invoked as norms for community behavior. In much of Polynesia and Micronesia, the church is formally recognized as one of the three pillars of island society (along with government and culture).

Christianity has left its stamp on the culture in any number of ways. The names of Sunday and Saturday in several of the island languages often translate as the “sacred day” and “day of preparation” (ie, when food is cooked to avoid unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day). In Samoa, newcomers may be startled to find that village life comes to a sudden stop for a few minutes in the early evening to provide for silent prayer. This is marked on the daily schedule just as the recitation of the Angelus once was in Catholic countries throughout the world. Prayer is customarily offered by a church leader at the beginning of any major event, although in some places these are counter-balanced by chants to the traditional spirits. The chants are more intended to acknowledge traditional culture as such than to appease any remaining believers in the old religion.

*Christianity Shaped by Culture*

Christianity at first tended to define itself by its opposition to certain features of traditional island culture, especially those that seemed to pose a threat to the new faith. Any sort of spirit worship, even the veneration of human ancestral spirits, was looked upon as a threat to the new religion. Early missionaries in the Marianas in the seventeenth century provoked violent reaction from the local people when they smashed the skulls of the dead. Much the same was recorded in Papua New Guinea and other parts of Melanesia during early encounters. The first generation of missionaries were usually insistent on adhering rigidly to their own religious beliefs and rituals. Indeed, Christian orthodoxy was very often defined in opposition to local practices, even if the local practices were not expressly religious. It was only later, after Christianity had been established, that church leaders could temper this strict approach and welcome local practices and an island flavor to their faith.

Over the years, Christianity has intentionally absorbed many aspects of the island culture, even some that had been initially denied. This has been particularly true of Catholicism and the major Protestant denominations since the 1960s in the interest of localizing the church. Liturgical ceremonies today often feature much less organ music and more of island instruments and sound. In French Polynesia, among other places, the use of conch shells, drums, and folkloric dances has been reintroduced into the liturgy. Throughout Oceania traditional dances, often accompanied by seemingly ancient chants, are used for liturgical celebrations. Catholic penance services in Chuuk and Pohnpei are conducted somewhat differently in each place, with the Pohnpeian service featuring a reconciliation offering of *sakau* (kava). But they conclude with a long exchange of peace greetings among those attending–the sort of ending you might expect in the Pacific.

Funeral practices, too, reflect the traditional patterns: the presentation of the body before family and friends, the creation of a shrine of sorts commemorating the deceased, the wake itself–although it has lengthened from the traditional three or four days to a week or more. Overall, traditional religions throughout the islands emphasized *mana* (divine power) that was reflected throughout the world. This linkage was especially strong between the living and the spirits of the deceased. All this fostered a sense of unity between body and soul, between the individual and the entire world. This unity which might once have been dismissed as pantheistic and a challenge to the one God of Christianity, has in more recent times been blessed by many of the churches and absorbed into mainstream Christianity.

Christianity has not just incorporated cultural elements into its ritual and devotional practices, but it has picked up institutional features of island society as well. One case in point is the proliferation of formal titles offered by the church–something that is to be found nearly everywhere in Oceania, even in those places where a formal title system was not part of the traditional society. In the Congregational Church on Kosrae, for instance, the number of members with titles (eg, pastors, deacons, prayer leaders) has increased tenfold since 1950 even though the population has barely doubled. Catholic churches, as well, have multiplied and formalized the titles, which now include not just Priest and Deacon, but Eucharistic Minister, Lector and even Usher.

In Australia and New Zealand, where the indigenous people represent a small minority of the total population, the local church was slow in developing. In Australia the number began growing significantly only within the past fifty years, as local peoples, now settled in their ethnic communities, became confident that church membership was compatible with their cultural heritage. Maoris in New Zealand, who had accepted Christianity much earlier, experienced serious tensions in their churches through the years until they, too, were assured that Christianity did not force them to surrender the political identity they had adopted over time.

*Features of Christianity in Oceania today*

The face of Christianity in Oceania today is far different from its beginning a couple of centuries earlier. Over the years, as the faith became ever more rooted in the islands, Christianity was free to take on many of the features of Pacific society. Yet, many of the changes date from the 1960s, a period recognized as a time of upheaval throughout the modern world. .

At first, each region, whether an island or a village, was usually associated with a single religious denomination. Over the years, however, the different forms of Christian faith spread and villages became religiously diverse, with different religious groups conducting their services alongside one another. Ecumenism eventually took this a large step further by offering the various faith groups the opportunity to interact with one another.

Recent decades have seen the introduction of smaller evangelical churches and newer Christian movements throughout the region. This includes not just Pentecostal and Charismatic groups, but Latter Day Saints, Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and other small churches. Even if these groups may not number as many adherents as the mainline denominations, their places of worship can be found nearly everywhere. In some island groups the membership of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches has grown significantly in recent years, even as their influence has expanded. Yet, overall the newer church groups account for a small percentage of all Christians in the region.

Throughout Oceania, Christian churches have shown a pronounced tendency to break up into smaller units. This is especially true in Melanesia, though certainly not confined to that region alone. In a few places, church fragmentation has resulted in the founding of quasi-traditional religious groups that take on some of the features of Christianity but label themselves “island churches.” Often this is less a reaction to Christianity than to the social changes that have so often accompanied its arrival. Modekngei in Palau, the cargo cults in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and the John Frum Movement on the island of Tanna are examples.

Despite the strong sectarian isolation that marked the early mission work in the region, ecumenism took off in the 1960s, as it did in other parts of the globe. Inter-church organizations were founded, joint meetings of clergy and church leaders held, collaboration on social issues begun, and even shared seminary training initiated in the decades following. Today, however, the ecumenical interest seems to have declined. Perhaps it is fair to say that the gatherings and formal initiatives are far fewer today, even if the tolerance and fellowship that it bred has become part of the religious environment these days.

In nearly all cases, church leadership has passed on from the foreign missionaries who first introduced the faith to the islanders who serve as pastors and bishops today. This happened much earlier in Protestant churches than in Catholic. In some parts of Oceania, the transition to local leadership might have taken only ten years. For Catholics, with their long seminary training and the celibacy requirement, the transition was much slower. Seminaries for the training of church leaders were opened quite early on, and today they are found everywhere in the region.

Throughout most of Oceania, emigration has become common in recent decades, as islanders increasingly look to larger nations for jobs and the other opportunities they offer. This provides a needed check on population increase in the islands. The exception is Melanesia, where the island population continues to grow by about two percent a year. When islanders leave home to establish themselves in other places (including Australia and New Zealand), they bring with them the lively expression of their faith. Migrant churches of various denominations have sprung up in their new homes, often brightening the surroundings with with their warm welcome, joyful song and other touches of island flavor.

What about Australia and New Zealand, the larger and more industrialized sections of Oceania? Both places have suffered a severe drop in numbers of Christians over the past 50 years, with the number of those identifying as Christians dropping from over 90 percent to about 50 percent. Christianity in both places, however, is showing signs of ethnic diversity as small immigrant groups (many of them Asian) assume a larger role in the Christian churches. Much of the vitality that the churches enjoy is supplied by newcomers–an important contribution in a period of declining membership. This is the reverse of Polynesia and Micronesia where emigration rather than immigration is the norm, and where island migrants stamp their own mark on the churches they join in their new homes.

In general, Christianity seems to be quite strong today throughout most of the region, far more so than in many other parts of the world. The colonial West introduced many new elements into the life of the people of Oceania. Those colonial governments have faded for the most part, and much of the other foreign apparatus has vanished, but the Christianity they brought has survived in the islands–even more hardily than it has in those nations that first brought it to Oceania.

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