Secondary Conversion and the Anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia

Conversion secondaire et anthropologie du christianisme en Mélanésie

Conversión secundaria y antropología del cristianismo en Melanesia

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John Barker

Secondary Conversion and the Anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia

The Anthropology of Christianity is very much the child of a broader transformation in the discipline often referred to as the “historical turn” or, specifically in the case of the southwest Pacific, the “new Melanesian historiography” (Foster, 1995b). While some aspects of this initiative continue to be subject to widespread criticism—particularly the “invention of tradition” concept—most of its lessons have been deeply absorbed. Ethnographers have for the most part abandoned the fiction of treating local “cultures” as self-contained and self-replicating entities, lying outside of history and unconnected to the outside world. This in turn has opened the door to studies of aspects of the modern experience of Melanesians largely ignored in the older literature both from the traditional ethnographic perspective of local communities and, most significantly, in terms of regional and global networks and developments. Prior to these wider intellectual developments, anthropologists tended to think about Melanesian Christianity—when they thought of it at all—mainly in the context of local people’s acceptance or resistance to missionaries which, in turn, was conceptualized as a movement from indigenous tradition to Western modernity. Such assumptions worked to deflect attention away from Christianity as a subject in its own right (Barker, 1990a, 1992). Taking Melanesian Christianity seriously requires a far more sophisticated, multidimensional understanding of Melanesian society, Christianity and the dynamics of social and religious change.

To repeat, these lessons have been deeply absorbed, well beyond Melanesian studies (Cannell, 2006, Engelke and Tomlinson, 2006, Hefner, 1993). All the same, we are continually presented with dualistic models of Christian conversion. Thus the Comaroffs (1991, 1997) configure their analysis in *Of Revelation and Revolution* around a “long conversation” between British missionaries and the Tswana in a process that, in ways direct and subtle, absorbed Africans into the emergent hegemonic orientations of the West. Whitehouse (1998) perceives conversion in Melanesia as entailing a confrontation of two radically distinct forms of cognition between Western missionaries and indigenous populations, played out in diametrically opposed modes of ritual practice. In a series of influential articles, Robbins (2003, 2005, 2007) has resisted a widespread tendency

to conflate Christianity with Western modernity; yet his model also assumes a dualistic structure, with conversion entailing “rupture” from previous cultural configurations to a Christianity characterized, in Dumontian fashion, by a focal set of key orienting values, particularly individualism. Inevitably, Robbins’ position has provoked opposition from several anthropologists who marshal evidence from various parts of the world to demonstrate that in many places people have experienced conversion as an addition to or fulfillment of local traditions, that there is considerable continuity in change (Hann, 2007, McDougall, 2009, Mosko, 2010). Most anthropologists of Christianity occupy the mushy middle in such debates, seeing evidence of both continuity and change (Barker, 2008b). All the same, the terms various scholars have coined to describe local manifestations of Christianity in Africa or Oceania—as “multiple”, “vernacular”, “hybrid”, and the like—reveal just how difficult it is to let go of the underlying dichotomy of the (modern) West versus the (traditional) Rest (*cf.* Jebens, 2011: 92-93).

While the dualistic models have merits and uses in analyzing long term patterns of conversion, they may severely distort researchers’ understandings of what they encounter in the field. In much of village Melanesia, particularly insular and lowlands regions, Christianity exists within a neo-traditional complex of customary practices and introduced institutions. People often talk of Christianity as occupying its own domain, distinct from *kastom* (“custom”) and government spheres (Barker, 2007b, Otto, 1992). Where historical records are thin or lacking, the temptation may be to map a present-day ideological model onto the past and interpret contemporary practices as evidence of rupture or continuity. Yet careful ethnohistorical research has consistently demonstrated that contemporary “traditions” in Pacific Island communities have been deeply influenced by Christianity (White, 1991). By the same token, local understandings of Christianity frequently bear the deep imprints of indigenous cosmologies and reciprocal moralities—even when converts consciously struggle to wholly abandon their previous cultures (Burt, 1994, Robbins, 2004). In other words, present configurations offer at best ambiguous clues as to the direction of a community’s conversion.

Few anthropologists have witnessed, and even fewer studied, the initial conversion of a Melanesian community.¹ Yet it is not unusual today to observe events that appear remarkably reminiscent of the early missionary encounter: confrontations between adherents of newish mainly conservative Evangelical Christians and settled congregations in the villages. The former—mostly younger and better educated—regard the long-established local church with its toleration of *kastom* as little better than paganism. The old guard, in turn, defends their

1. Exceptions include Schieffelin (2002), Tuzin (1997), and Williams (1944).

established ways in the name of “tradition”, a category that here includes familiar forms of Christian worship and practice (Errington and Gewertz, 1995). In other cases, local people succumb to the appeal of the new evangelists, abandoning the humdrum business of daily life for the “mad” ecstasy of Christian revivalism (Clark, 1992, Robin, 1982). Not surprising, several scholars have fallen back upon a familiar mode of explanation. Thus Mosko (2010) perceives patterns of exchange within revivalist Christianity as analogous to Melanesian notions of “partible” personhood. At the other extreme, Ernst (1994) perceives the ardent individualism of the newer churches as auguring a complete break with the collectivist values of the past (*cf.* Digim’Rina, 1999). Thus the new situation of secondary conversion provokes a familiar debate: whether the transformations are best understood as cultural continuity—old wine in new bottles—or the replacement of one culture by another, a modern replay of the “fatal impact” of missionary interference in the early years of contact in Polynesia (Moorehead, 1966).

This essay’s task is to set out some suggestions to aid in the study of secondary conversion in western Melanesia. I have already discussed the first and perhaps the most basic: the need to suspend—if not jettison completely—missionary and similarly dualistic models of conversion in analyzing religious change in the short term, particularly in today’s common situation of denominational sectarianism and secondary conversion of people already familiar with Christian principles and practices. My main purpose, however, is positive. I make three general points. The first is an appeal to treat secondary conversion within an historical framework. In most rural areas, the new evangelists do not encounter a pristine indigenous cultural order but rather one in which already incorporates Christianity and this, in turn, inevitably shapes the reception of new versions of the religion. Second, anthropologists need to look beyond their traditional bases in rural villages to fully deal with the new situation. The dynamic center of Christianity has shifted from missions and seminaries serving rural areas to new urban-based churches that extend across regional networks. This in turn calls for much more attention to urban studies as well as multi-sited ethnographic strategies to better capture the regional aspects of Christianity. Finally, I warn against a worrisome tendency to turn the Anthropology of Christianity into a sub-discipline in which anthropologists speaking only to other anthropologists. One of the signal weaknesses of current anthropological research on Christianity in Melanesia is a lack of attention to scholarship on the subject from other disciplinary viewpoints.²

2. Given the nature of this critique, most of the items I reference in this article are written by anthropologists who, in any case, dominate the field. I have, however, freely referred to works by historians, theologians, and religious studies specialists where relevant.

In Media Res: the Social Impact of Secondary Conversion in Christian Melanesia

In his brilliant *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, John Peel (2000: 24) writes that the study of Christianity in Nigeria:

Does not start at the beginning, but has to plunge *media res*... We come in on people in a predicament, in the *middle* straits of something... Yoruba agents of the Church Missionary Society were always aware that they stood in the middle of a process of tumultuous, unprecedented change.

Peel is here writing of the initial period of missionary encounter, making what has now become a standard, if challenging, argument. History in places like Nigeria does not begin or become definitively defined by the arrival and actions of European colonialists or their agents. Instead, the intruders enter into the midst of an unfolding situation shaped as much if not more by the cultural practices and orientations, aspirations and personalities of the indigenous peoples. The same holds true for contemporary Melanesia, only here the latest wave of Christian evangelists are unlikely to encounter people unfamiliar with the Bible or church services. Instead, they enter unfolding histories already shaped by earlier missionary encounters and, in many cases, long acceptance of Christian practice and ideas.

From the perspective of local societies, the history of Christianity in Melanesia unfolds in three distinctive, if overlapping, phases (Garrett, 1992, 1997, Trompf, 1991). The first phase predated and continued through much of the colonial period up to the end of the Second World War. By mutual agreement backed by government enforcement—with some limited but important exceptions³—a small number of missions carved out different spheres of operation in the islands and lowlands of western Melanesia, producing over time a distinctive geography of denominational affiliation: Presbyterians in central Vanuatu, Congregationalists in the Loyalty Islands and southern Papua, Roman Catholics in the hinterlands behind Yule Island, and so forth. Poorly financed and understaffed, these missions relied to a considerable extent on the labour of converts to expand their influence and operate an ever-increasing number of village churches and schools (*e.g.*, Barker, 2005). Apart from mission stations and villages under the direct supervision of European staffs, this form of expansion virtually guaranteed local compromises and accommodations: fertile grounds for a bewildering array of syncretic expressions, the most famous of which were the

3. Notably, Roman Catholic missionary orders refused to participate in such comity agreements, as did a few small Protestant groups such as the South Sea Evangelical Mission in the Solomon Islands. While moments of competition and conflict sometimes flared, however, even these missions in practice tended to carve out their own areas of operation. Consequently, when members of communities converted during this period it was almost always to the same denomination, setting up the conditions for identification between whole villages and specific churches.

so-called “cargo cults” (Worsley, 1968). All the same, for most Melanesians during the colonial period, the missions provided by far the main point of contact with Westerners. This was in no small part because they held a near monopoly on educational and medical services as well as engaging in commercial enterprises and various experiments in social engineering such as “industrial missions” (Langmore, 1989, Wetherell, 1977).

A second phase of evangelization occurred following the Second World War and lasted well into the 1960s. The established missions received increased financing from supporters and governments, allowing them to provide indigenous teachers and clergy with better training, to open secondary schools and specialized colleges, and to expand into unevangelized areas. Entrance into the new fields, however, was marked by sharply increased competition as the old comity agreements were abandoned and a number of new denominations entered the scene. The stature of individual missions was further diminished as colonial governments assumed increasing control of education and health services, setting up their own systems while establishing standards (along with most of the financing) for most church-run schools and hospitals (Clay, 2005).

The third phase, dating from the mid-1960s, is of principal interest to this paper. In tandem with most colonial governments in the region, the established missions underwent rapid decolonization, promoting indigenous clergy to positions of leadership and setting the grounds for the emergence of national churches. In line with the nationalist ethos of the time, the mainline churches also worked to make their peace with indigenous cultures, deliberately encouraging the merging of Christian and local ritual forms and the development of distinctively Melanesian theologies (Trompf, 1987). With a large majority of Melanesians at least nominally Christian, new missions burst upon the scene. Some, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, had actually had a small presence in the region for decades but only now began to aggressively expand. Most, however, were newcomers: mostly Fundamentalist and Pentecostal sects accompanied by Evangelical interdenominational “para-church” organizations,⁴ such as the Wycliffe Bible Translators and World Vision. Some worked as traditional missions, carrying their versions of Christianity to the last remote peoples yet untouched by the Word. The majority targeted populations that had belonged to the mainline churches for a generation or more yet who, from their perspective, were scarcely better than “untouched heathen”. Pentecostal groups in particular were decentralized and highly egalitarian in their organization. Initially established in urban areas, they attracted young men and women to their enthusiastic worship services. Over time, members attended small urban seminaries,

4. These are international missionary organizations that promote Christianity without an affiliation to a specific church (Ernst, 1994: 14). Some are involved directly in church-building; others engage in proselytizing through the media and/or large public “crusades”; whereas others provide services such as Bible translation or air transport.

often under the tutelage of a charismatic white pastor, and then fanned out, back to their home villages to conduct their own “crusades” and set up new congregations or breakaway churches (Barr, 1983). One of the defining marks of the third phase of evangelism in the region has been the explosion in the number of Christian organizations. Studying census and other materials, Philip Gibbs (2006) identified thirty or so churches and missions at work in Papua New Guinea in 1971; by 2000, this number had ballooned to more than 200, probably an underestimate.

For remote and recently converted peoples, the arrival of revivalist missionaries replays in some ways the initial confrontation of Christianity with indigenous cultures elsewhere in the Pacific (see, *e.g.*, Knauft, 2002, Robbins, 2004, Schieffelin, 2002, Tuzin, 1997). For the most part, however, the latest emissaries of the Word have been entering communities in which Christianity is long established. People may be told and even feel that they are not truly Christian when confronted by the new evangelists, but they are not being introduced into an entirely novel religious universe. The basic forms are familiar; the jump is not so great cognitively. A new chapter may be opening, but it is one in which the church is already a familiar presence.

One would thus expect the reception of third phase evangelists to be conditioned by people’s prior experience of Christianity and the nature of the local church establishment. Missions created new social configurations wherever they took root, but these varied significantly according to both local conditions and the form of mission organization. In some places, such as the “school villages” found in parts of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, converts formed new settlements distinguished both spatially and organizationally from “custom” villages (Burt, 1994, Eriksen, 2008). In the low density interior regions of Papua, villagers often shifted from far flung small settlements to concentrate around mission stations to take advantage of school, medical facilities and opportunities for trade (Knauft, 2002, Wetherell and Carr-Gregg, 1984). Where missions built schools and churches within established villages, the changes were more subtle but in the long run often profound, affecting forms of governance, exchanges, and customary practices (Barker, 1996). Those villages fortunate enough to possess a school—and better yet, a school run by a white missionary—provided the missions with the bulk of their new clergy and health workers. As the Melanesian territories decolonized, these mission villages formed the primary pool for the creation of a professional class in the government and private spheres of the emergent countries.

The form of church establishment in any locality depended upon many factors, not least the reception by local people upon whom the missions depended heavily for recruits, labour, food and other necessities. While not determinate, the contributions from the mission side were nevertheless important. All missions, past and present, share certain broad characteristics deriving from common Christian principles, programs of moral reform, and practical requirements

for sustaining their operations. Once a mission has been accepted into a local community, the form that local Christianity takes is shaped by three main factors, all in dialogue with local peoples: the form of mission organization; the degree to which local missions are in competition with other foreign actors; and time.

On the basis of these factors, one can draw several broad distinctions between the typical organizational configurations of first and second phase Christian communities. This is a particularly fruitful approach in the case of first phase missions which, facing little or no competition in most areas from either rival missions or the colonial government, had an especially profound influence on newly converted villages. There are intriguing possibilities for comparison here. Along the southern coast of Papua, for instance, members of the London Missionary Society imparted Congregationalist ideals of independent, self-supporting congregations. Under the guidance of indigenous pastors, parishioners engaged in relatively egalitarian forms of worship, freely contributing prayers and testimonials in lengthy church services (Ryan, 1969). In Mailu, and likely elsewhere along the coast, church councils were introduced made up of male representatives of local clans, providing a nascent form of village government (Abbi 1975). Congregationalism in effect bolstered a sense of the village (congregation) as a distinctive and autonomous political unit. Along the northeastern coast, by way of contrast, Anglican missionaries imparted a hierarchical conception of Christian worship and institutional order. Church services rigidly followed the *Book of Common Prayer*, led by clergy and lay-preachers licensed by the bishop, allowing only limited ritualized responses from congregants. Uiaku and likely other villages along the coast evolved a dual organization, with the church and school both physically and conceptually perceived as the “station”, connected to European life and the Christian god, surrounded by the “village”, associated with the world of custom, kinship and ancestral spirits (Barker, 1990b, *cf.* Kahn, 1983). Consequently, the kind of fusion between church councils and village governance one finds on the south coast of Papua did not happen in Uiaku.

While such variations were significant, first phase villages shared a key commonality that sets them apart from most second phase communities. Over time as the church became a familiar fixture of local life, it provided people with a new centre of identity, focused upon the village rather than kin groups (Abbi, 1975, Barker, 1996). Church festivals, marked by feasting and the giving of gifts to support the work of the missions, in many places supplanted kin-based exchanges sponsored by big men (Eriksen, 2008, Gregory, 1980, Hermkens, 2007a). New forms of village-wide voluntary associations came into being: church councils, youth and women’s groups, and cooperative movements. Across much of insular and lowlands Melanesia, Christianity became an essential part of an emerging ethnic identity, along with idealizations of government and custom (Barker, 2007b, Dundon, 2002, Foster, 1995a, Neumann, 1992, Smith,

1994). These tendencies were increasingly pronounced the longer a mission enjoyed a monopoly in its own area of influence. In effect, Christianity became strongly associated, and in places conflated, with local ethnic and political identities (White, 1991).

Far less is known about second phase situations, but the studies that exist suggest a very different configuration. Converts take their Christian identities seriously, perhaps more seriously than in typical first phase villages. Yet they are less centered upon a notion of a shared community of believers. Much of this can be accounted for in terms of the changed circumstances marking the entries of missions into unevangelized areas in the 1950s and 1960s when they began to face real competition, not just from each other but from the government which increasingly assumed control over education and health services. People thus had choice as to which church to affiliate with, if any, and could debate different paths to “modernity” (Jebens, 2005). The village church lost much of its symbolic potency as a symbol of community unity. It is perhaps telling that whereas church festivals provide the main occasions for traditional dancing among the Maisin and the Tolai, second phase Gebusi converts participate in government sponsored *sing-sings* (Knauft, 2002). As rival missions gained adherents and became established under the leadership of local evangelists, villages often split into constellations centered on different churches. This may in turn have fostered a more other-worldly attitude in which adherence to one or another church is tied to larger millenarian and apocalyptic narratives. According to Jebens (2005), Pairundu villagers in the Southern Highlands incorporate rival sects into a common narrative of “pathways to heaven”, understood broadly as the road to a new world of equality with Europeans (*cf.* Chowning, 1990). The shift of membership between different factors thus provides a rough measure of popular perception of the bigger “story” (Jebens, 2000).

If the contrast I’m making holds, one would expect communities converted in the first and the second phases of missionization to respond rather differently to third phase evangelists. For first phase villages, the arrival of competition is likely to be perceived as a challenge, not just to faith but more directly to community unity, and either resisted or encompassed. Second phase villages are more likely to be receptive to the newcomers, whose teaching adds to the diversity of possible pathways to salvation.

Let me use the Maisin of Collingwood Bay in Papua New Guinea as an example of a first phase response (Barker, 2008a). First some background: Because of the long establishment of the Anglican mission, the Maisin had early access to secondary school education following the Second World War and consequently entry into the professional classes during the period of decolonization and early independence of Papua New Guinea. In the early 1980s, nearly an entire generation of young people from the largest village of Uiaku was away being schooled or employed, mostly in urban areas. Anglicanism maintained its local monopoly until the early 1990s when migrants began to return from the

towns. While in town, some had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA), and the Christian Revival Crusade, a Pentecostal organization. When they returned to the villages, the converts held worship services in their own homes, in two cases building small chapels. The Pentecostals in particular made known their objection to Anglican worship—which they criticized as empty ritual—and even more so to the easy mixture of Anglican and indigenous practices in death ceremonies and other occasions.

The initial reaction was fierce. The Pentecostal chapel was burned down. It was clear from my discussions with villagers after this event that the objections had less to do with theological differences than the fear that community solidarity would be broken (*cf.* Wakefield, 2001). The effort, therefore, was to marginalize if not drive out the new factions. This had mixed results. The Pentecostals rebuilt their chapel but as of June 2007 had lost some of their membership while the SDA faction had grown slightly. At the same time, the overriding concern with community solidarity encouraged some interesting compromises on both sides. While Anglican church services remain as rigidly controlled by the clergy as ever, Maisin youth eagerly embraced a fellowship movement endorsed by the Church that encourages testimonials and lively gospel singing and which includes some charismatic elements such as the laying on of hands for healing (Barker, 2003, 2007a). For their part, some of the converts to the rival sects have returned to the Anglican fold while most of the others participate in church festivals and other community events, although not in traditional dress. I was fascinated in 2000, when leading a delegation of Canadian Aboriginal people to visit with the Maisin, when an SDA member voluntarily took on the role of tour guide, explaining to them the importance of several customary Maisin practices and rituals. While he himself refused to participate, he clearly took great pride in these “pagan” symbols of Maisin identity.

Third phase evangelists are far less likely to encounter such forms of resistance and compromise in second phase situations where community solidarity around a single church does not exist. The chances for recruitment are also greater, especially if there is already a history of people shifting their allegiance between rival sects. To the degree that Christianity is separated from the issue of political solidarity, people are more likely to focus upon the exciting messages of the newcomers which often as not proclaim the possibility of material prosperity through faith, spiritual gifts of healing, the urgency of spiritual warfare against Satan and his minions, rumours of the evil deeds of the Anti-Christ and the coming Apocalypse (Kocher-Schmid, 1999).

The Orokaiva area of central Oro Province in Papua New Guinea has long provided a stage for this kind of thing, much to the frustration of the Anglican Church which has a strong physical presence but since the 1950s mixed success in winning the hearts and minds of the people. A few months prior to the massive floods that destroyed many villages in the area in November 2007, news emerged of a new Christian “cargo cult” reputedly led by a retired Anglican nun and

George Ambo, the first Papuan to be ordained a bishop in the Anglican Church and its former Archbishop.⁵ The Pentecostal Christian Revival Crusade has long enjoyed a warm reception in Orokaiva villages (Barr, 1983). Pastors set up congregations but they enjoy considerable independence and thus shifting allegiances. Congregants appear to move frequently back and forth between the Anglicans and the new sects. All the same, the influence of the third phase evangelists cannot be denied. During the elections of 2007, the winning candidate for government of Oro (out of a slate of 62!) was a Pentecostal pastor well regarded in the region as a member of a gospel stringband and for raising the dead.

The sketch I've provided here can only be suggestive. Yet I would argue that it is a reasonable hypothesis, one that fits well with what we have learned so far about Melanesian Christianity. Here is another piece of suggestive evidence. Consider the age old question of why cargo cults appear regularly in some areas of Melanesia and not others. In a fascinating comparative study, Jebens documents the differing reactions of the Pairundu of the Southern Highlands and the Koimumu of East New Britain to stories of the impending End Times circulating across the region immediately prior to the year 2000. Whereas the Pairundu were electrified by fear and anticipation, the Koimumu reacted with calm indifference. Why the difference? Jebens speculates, "One answer might be provided by correlations between Christian millenarianism and cultural elements that were already present before the advent of the first missionaries" (Jebens, 2000: 186). This is obviously a strong possibility. Yet it cannot be the whole story, because word of the pending end times came to communities that had already embraced Christianity. Koimumu appears to have responded with the typical caution of first phase Christians while second phase Pairundu villagers, long accustomed to sectarian competition, were far more open to the possibility of rupture.⁶

Beyond the Village

The anthropological reflex is to think of Melanesians in terms of cultural or "tribal" identities, singular and locally grounded. But identity in Melanesia has always been a work in progress, with multiple possibilities formed through kin and exchange networks, warfare and alliances. Christianity and colonialism

5. On his death bed a year later, Bishop Ambo repudiated the movement claiming some of his followers had misrepresented his intentions, which had been to reach out to former Anglicans and return them to the mother church. See http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2009/02/the-strange-story-of-bishop-sir-george-ambo.html

6. My research among the Maisin reinforces this conclusion. While villagers had heard the rumours of pending End Times by the late 1990s, outside of the tiny group of Pentecostals most reacted with skepticism, cautious at first but rising to derision after the clock ticked over into 2000 without mishap (*cf.* Bashkow, 2000).

expanded range of identities accessible to Melanesians by introducing new regional networks and, along with them, novel ways of identifying with others—particularly distant others. The spread of third phase evangelism has been facilitated by the existence of these prior networks and associations, some with histories reaching back more than a century. Just as established forms of Christian belief and practice have conditioned the reception of third phase evangelism, regional networks created by previous missionary efforts have facilitated the spread of new ideas and forms of worship. Thus if the Anthropology of Christianity is to be truly inclusive, it needs not only better ethnographies of rural communities but studies focused upon regional associations and networks.

Because the early missions relied so heavily upon the support of converts to head local churches and schools and to expand their reach into new territories, Melanesians were incorporated into mission networks very quickly. Usually poorly paid and largely dependent upon the gifts of their congregations, not least the captive labour of school children, the emerging pastorate nevertheless formed a small elite core by virtue of their association with white missionaries. Their sons received better education than most as well as the likelihood of becoming teachers or pastors themselves (Oram, 1971); and their wives and daughters received advanced training in the domestic arts befitting the expectations of Christian feminine domesticity (Douglas, 1999, Jolly, 1991). Further, they gained stature as members of a network above and beyond their local villages—identities further consolidated in those missions whose policies prevented indigenous staffs from working in their birth communities. A significant portion of the emergent middle class in the late colonial and early independence period came from this background (Latukeyu, 1981).

The first and second phase missions were rural in their focus. By this I mean something more than the fact that they took Christianity to people where they lived. A large segment of the white staffs came from farms in their home countries while all of the large Polynesian and Melanesian staffs were themselves gardeners; indeed, as Latukeyu (1978) has documented, Islander missionaries created much good will with local people by introducing crop varieties and techniques from their home societies. Beyond this, many European missionaries conceived of their task in rural terms, as resistance to the “evils” of the rapid industrialization and migration to the cities happening in their home countries. Thus Methodist leaders dreamed of creating independent yeoman farmers while Anglican bishops believed they saw in Papuan villages the image of a medieval English village with the priest paternally watching over the souls of his flock (Wetherell, 1977).

Churches were initially established in towns to serve the European population and the small numbers of employed Melanesians. During the late colonial period, the mainline churches expanded their presence in the rapidly growing urban areas. Such churches became quickly incorporated into *wantok* networks,

allowing urban dwellers to regularly meet and worship with kin and others sharing a common ethnic background.

The orientation of third phase churches is very different. Most have started in urban areas and maintain their largest influence there. Just as importantly, their forms of organization and leadership emerge largely out of urban cultures in which ethnic mingling is the norm rather than the exception. Many of the new churches make considerable demands on their members, including tithing and the assumption of various prohibitions that collectively serve to diminish their connections to members to their natal communities while tightening their identity on their church. Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches as further associated with global networks, elements of which seem to be everywhere and nowhere: the prosperity gospel, televangelists, signs of the End Times, rumours of the anti-Christ, and so forth. The moral values of many of these churches appear as highly individualistic. One is tempted to say, along with Ernst (1994: 285) that “There is nothing Pacific, local, or contextual in this” and that the theologies on offer have “nothing to offer for the variety of social, economic and political problems in the present or future” (*ibid.*: 287).

As I argued in the Introduction to this paper, however, it is very risky to read the complex and transient events of the present into the grand narrative of conversion from tradition to Christianity, as a one-way movement into a uniform global modernity. In point of fact, we know remarkably little about third phase missions. One would assume that the severe requirements and austere worship style of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church would appeal to a different segment of the urban population than a Pentecostal sect, but we actually don’t know. We do not really know the motivations of people who attend a Benny Hinn rally at a Port Moresby stadium or regularly attend Pentecostal celebrations. Are they drawn in by the showmanship and the exciting messages on an individual basis? Or is there a “silent” back-story in which peoples’ existing kinship and exchange networks lead them in certain directions—from “roots to routes” (*cf.* Eriksen, 2008). What role does gender play in participation and leadership? How do people respond to, say, messages about “spiritual warfare” which seem to form such an important part of contemporary Pentecostalism, particularly in urban areas, separated from the deeply rooted mythologies of the countryside (Jorgensen, 2005, Stritecky, 2001)? Are they simply imposing theologies and mythologies from elsewhere, or, in the hothouse environment of the cities, do these imported theologies and mythologies become inflected by Melanesian values, orientations, and narratives? Finally, what role do these sects play in people’s adjustments to urban life and to movements between rural and urban centers? Do they provide people with a means—both practically and ideological—to escape social obligations? Or do they reformulate those obligations in novel ways?

Meanwhile, it needs to be kept in mind that the majority of Melanesians continue to belong to the established churches and those churches, in turn, are

engaged in many initiatives in the urban areas and regionally. Strong charismatic movements have grown within the churches in competitive response to Pentecostal sects. The churches also organize their own revivals and fellowship movements, incorporating popular gospel tunes and evangelistic styles of public testimonials and preaching (Barker, 2003, 2007a, Gewertz and Errington, 1997). Regional networks of youth and women's church groups have also emerged; these not only often have a significant presence in the villages, but provide a means of bringing rural and urban-based members together on a regular basis (Douglas, 2003a, Eriksen, 2008). Such networks, in turn, allow for the rapid dissemination of new religious ideas and movements, such as Marian devotional movements among Catholic women (Hermkens, 2007b, 2008).

Not surprisingly, much of the recent literature on religious change in Melanesia has focused upon the steady loss of members from "mainline" to the newer, mostly Evangelical churches (Ernst, 2006). From an anthropological perspective, perhaps a more interesting development has been the growth of choice in Christian affiliation, particularly in the towns but increasingly in rural areas. This development in turn bears a close semantic association with emergent regional formulations of consumerism, citizenship, individualism, and nationalism: in sum, the development of a sense pan-Melanesian sense of identity in a globalized world, an identity in which Christianity clearly forms a central element (Foster, 2002, Latukefu, 1988).

Other Contexts, other Views

By this point, it should be clear that much of the reality of Christianity in Melanesia is not accessible through ethnographic research. This may seem obvious but it is still crucial. There is a tendency in anthropology, as in other disciplines, to become myopically focused on internal issues and overly rely upon established traditions of research. Thus as I read current writing by anthropologists on issues like continuity and change, the implications of conversion on notions of the person and morality, and so forth, I'm struck by how insular the discussions often appear to be.⁷ Anthropologists are late comers to the study of

7. The outstanding, and rather depressing, example of this is Mosko (2010). Applying a kind of reverse inculturation argument, Mosko claims that Melanesian culture and Christianity both rest upon identical principles of "dividual" personhood as formulated in Strathern's influential, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988). Rather than exploring the implications of his hypothesis, however, he relies upon a purely rhetorical strategy of recasting a range of rather ordinary Christian practices and statements as forms of reciprocal exchange which he takes a *de facto* proof of partible dividuality. The analysis ignores historical and social contexts and all but the most superficial characteristics that define such practices and ideas as Christian. In effect, Christianity is rendered subservient to the defense of a rarified model of personhood and consequently all but disappears (Barker, 2010). Despite strained logic and sloppy scholarship, the article garnered the Curl Prize for the year's best essay in one of anthropology's most prestigious journals.

Christianity, possibly the most written-about religion on the face of the earth. Perhaps we can learn something from other longer-established perspectives and approaches? The sheer complexity of Christianity as a two thousand year old religious tradition spanning the globe should require us to temper our arguments—overwhelmingly based upon highly localized case studies—with wider insights derived from theological (foreign and indigenous), historical, political and sociological research.

I retain a memory of a scene from James Michener's *Hawaii*, read long ago, in which the “good” missionary doctor, who provides a foil for the vile Abner Hale, protests the destructive actions of one of the white invaders of the islands with the observation that missionaries are not without weapons: they write. And write they did: filling the archives that today provide the foundation for historical and much anthropological work on Christianity in Melanesia and elsewhere. What few anthropologists seem to realize is that they and their successors continue to write. Some are more visible, publishing ethnographic pieces in journals like *Anthropos*. Most write for small circulation regional journals or produce theses in local seminaries. Their work often deals with topics of key concern to anthropologists, although inflected with theological perspectives. The publications of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka have been particularly important, often identifying trends in the region long before anthropologists take notice—such as the politicization of Christianity or the response of the churches to the HIV/AIDS and environmental crises. They struggle to make sense of many of the same developments as anthropologists, albeit from a different perspective and with different motivations. Anthropologists, of course, do not need to accept those points of view, but it is important to be aware that they exist. They can be surprising. For instance, third phase evangelicals in Canada and Australia, as in Melanesia, are widely supposed to be firmly opposed to indigenous culture, particular ritual forms and notions of spirits. Yet in both countries, seminaries and programs at theological colleges can be easily found that foster the exploration of connections between religious traditions and Christianity as a positive good. Similar surprises may await us if we open our eyes to the possibility in Melanesia.

As for the wider contexts, a comparison to African studies is informative. In sub-Saharan Africa, historical and sociological research on missions and Christianity preceded anthropological work by many years. Scholarship on the public and political roles of religion is particularly well-developed (*e.g.*, Gifford, 1998). As a result, the best work coming from the pens of anthropologists like Jean and John Comaroff, Matthew Engelke, and Brigit Meyer is informed by a rich diversity of approaches and thus interdisciplinary in nature. Melanesia is highly unusual in the degree to which anthropology dominates social and cultural studies. Historical studies, not least of religion, are far less developed than elsewhere and political and sociological studies of Christianity virtually non-existent. The

work by Manfred Ernst (1994, 2006) and his colleagues is enormously important in providing the only contemporary surveys we have of the actual Christian organizations working in the region. Unfortunately, they are published by regional presses, not well-publicized, and hard to obtain.

Attention is beginning to be paid to wider contexts, although most of this work comes from the pens of anthropologists. Much is based upon local case studies, collated to produce a picture of wider situations. The work on HIV/AIDS is particularly important, revealing much about the ways in which local responses to the pandemic have been influenced and channel through the churches and Christianity ideologies (Butt and Eves, 2008). New research on the roles of women's church groups or of church interventions to curtail youth violence is also promising (Dinnen, 2001, Douglas, 2003b, Hermkens, 2007c). There is a critical need, however, to study Christianity at the national and regional levels—particularly the *politics* of Christianity (Barker, 2010, Eves, 2008). The fact that many prominent Melanesian politicians have been clergy or come from clergy families has long been noted. What has received far less attention is the prominence of Christianity in the national culture—in the form of popular media and in politics. As far as I'm aware, no secular bookstores exist today in Papua New Guinea and gospel music and services now fill the airwaves. I was struck on my last visit in June 2007 by the prominence of Christian references in campaign posters for the national election. The pioneering work by Philip Gibbs (2004) and Nancy Sullivan (2007)—both PNG based anthropologists—suggest that political careers, get rich schemes, millenarianism, and militant Christianity are forming a powerful synthesis in the centre of political life. Much of their evidence is culled from newspapers or anecdotal. As Jorgensen (2005) shows in an important paper, evangelical campaigns organized from Port Moresby, often with the explicit blessing of politicians, are reaching into even the most remote areas of the country. It is, however, very difficult in the absence of direct study to trace the links. There is also a danger in focusing upon the most extreme expressions of revivalist Christianity to neglect the fact that the mainline churches—which still include the large majority of Melanesians as members—are also responding to current crises in political ways. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has been involved in interventions meant to protect local land rights against state-supported development projects.

In sum, while anthropologists have much to contribute to our understanding of the current state of Christianity including the phenomenon of secondary conversion, we need to get other students trained in other disciplines interested as well. The study of Christianity necessarily requires a multiple of perspectives and approaches.

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Secondary Conversion and the Anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia

Anthropologists have in recent years turned their attention to Christianity in Melanesia. Much of this new work treats Melanesian Christianity in terms of the confrontation between indigenous "tradition" and global "modernity". However useful for long-term analysis, such dualistic framing distorts our understanding of the present, which is instead characterized by growing sectarianism and secondary conversions. I call for three changes in the ways anthropologists typically approach contemporary Melanesian Christianity. First, we need to understand secondary conversion primarily in historical terms, as a shift from localized forms of Christianity to newly introduced ones. Second, more attention needs to be paid to the lively forms of Christianity emerging in urban areas. Finally, I suggest that the domination of anthropology in the social science of Melanesia creates its own distorting lens and other disciplinary viewpoints should be encouraged and incorporated.

Key words: Christianity, conversion, Melanesia, religion and politics, Pentecostalism.

Conversion secondaire et anthropologie du christianisme en Mélanésie

Ces dernières années, les anthropologues ont tourné leur attention vers le christianisme en Mélanésie. Beaucoup de ces nouvelles recherches traitent du christianisme mélanésien en termes de confrontation entre la « tradition » indigène et la « modernité » mondiale. Bien qu'elle soit utile pour les analyses de long terme, cette approche dualiste fausse notre interprétation du présent, qui se caractérise en fait par la montée du sectarisme et des conversions secondaires. Je propose trois changements dans la manière dont les anthropologues abordent typiquement le sujet du christianisme contemporain en Mélanésie. D'abord, il faut concevoir la conversion secondaire avant tout en termes historiques, comme une transition des formes localisées du christianisme vers celles qui ont été introduites plus récemment. Ensuite, on doit accorder davantage d'attention aux pratiques chrétiennes qui émergent dans les zones urbaines.

Enfin, je suggère que la domination de l'anthropologie au sein des sciences sociales en Mélanésie crée son propre effet de distorsion optique, et que d'autres points de vue disciplinaires devraient être encouragés et associés.

Mots clés : christianisme, conversion, Mélanésie, religion et politique, pentecôtisme.

Conversión secundaria y antropología del cristianismo en Melanesia

Durante los últimos años, los antropólogos se interesaron en el cristianismo en Melanesia. Muchas de estas nuevas investigaciones abordan el cristianismo melanesio en términos de confrontación entre la “tradición” indígena y la “modernidad” mundial. Aunque sea útil para los análisis a largo plazo, este abordaje dualista falsea nuestra interpretación del presente, que se caracteriza de hecho por el crecimiento del sectarismo y de las conversiones secundarias. Propongo tres transformaciones en la manera a través de la que los antropólogos abordan típicamente el tema del cristianismo contemporáneo en Melanesia. En primer término, hay que concebir la conversión secundaria antes que nada en términos históricos, como una transición de las formas localizadas del cristianismo hacia aquellas que han sido introducidas más recientemente. En segundo lugar, se debe otorgar más atención a las prácticas cristianas que emergen en las zonas urbanas. Finalmente, sugiero que la dominación de la antropología sobre las ciencias sociales en Melanesia crea su propio efecto de distorsión óptica, y que otros puntos de vista disciplinarios deberían ser incentivados y asociados.

Palabras clave: cristianismo, conversión, Melanesia, religión y política, pentecostalismo.