Afterword

Beyond rupture: Temporalities of Christian culture in the Pacific

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Abstract:

In its many forms, Christianity tends to focus adherents' attention upon earlier religious traditions, compelling them to renew their faith, repent and seek redemption. This special issue takes up questions about Christianity's temporal "secondarity." Contributors move beyond increasingly futile theoretical debates about rupture and continuity by considering how Christians in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands conceptualise and enact their fraught relationships with prior religious traditions. By examining the place of culture *within* Christianity, contributors avoid the analytical pitfalls of assuming that Pacific culture is not already thoroughly Christian. Rather than taking up questions about initial Christian conversion, these articles focus on revival. The relentless campaigns of Christian renewal that have transformed religious landscapes more than a generation aim not only to overcome pre-Christian powers, but also to supersede earlier versions of Christianity. In examining not only highly localised ethnotheologies, but also regional movements, this issue opens questions that should be of interest beyond the anthropology of Christianity.

The anthropology of Christianity in the Pacific is saturated with discussions of the relationship *between* culture and Christianity. Is the relationship one of continuity, where prior cultural practices and worldviews continue to inform Christian practice? Or, is it one of rupture, where Christians really do become new kinds of people living new kinds of lives? Recent publications addressing such questions, carefully reviewed in this Special Issue's introduction, show that both rupture and continuity can be discerned in religious change. This Special Issue takes an important step beyond such discussions. Rather than looking at a relationship *between* culture and Christianity, the editors and contributors consider the position of culture *within* Christianity in the Pacific.

That little word, 'within,' makes a significant difference. It reminds us that, even in areas of Highlands Papua New Guinea where missionisation occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, Christianity has now been part of life for at least a generation. Arguably, Christianity's influence on the whole region is so profound that even the lives of non-Christians (for example, followers of ancestral religions or converts other global religions like the Bahá'í Faith or Islam) might be analysed as living 'within' a Christian world. Traditional ancestral religion as practiced by some people of the Kwaio region of Malaita in Solomon Islands, for example, has been deeply transformed through an attempt to hold traditional culture ('kastom') distinct from Christianity and the laws of the colonial and postcolonial state (Akin 2003). Even in such apparent exceptions, then, Christianity and culture are not external to one another.

In framing the special issue, Fraser Macdonald and Christiane Falck call our attention to a facet of Christianity that makes questions about the 'position of culture' particularly relevant. In all of its diverse forms, they suggest, Christianity is a tradition that 'sees itself as coming after a prior religion with which it sustains a complex relation that falls far short of simple rejection' (Robbins (2017, p 39, quoted in Macdonald and Falck, this issue). Many Christians, particularly Pentecostal, evangelical, and charismatic Christians, seek dramatic rebirth, a transformation of self and world; they are prone to interpret their lives in terms of discontinuities and contrasts, and make strenuous efforts to break with a sinful past. Yet, rupture is but one temporal mode within Christianity. The ancient and enduring Catholic Church conveys a sense of solidity and continuity. Liturgy—central in Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and some mainline Protestant traditions—incorporates new and old into a calendar attuned to earthly seasons. Yet, even in these continuity-oriented forms of the faith, it is hard to overlook a sustained focus on the project of overcoming what has come before and entering a new era.

This insistent attention to prior religion makes Christianity a religion of 'secondarity,' a term that the editors borrow from Joel Robbins (Robbins 2017, p 39, citing Brague 2002). In many of the cases discussed, the prior religion being overturned is not ancestral religion—sometimes, it is an alternative form of Christianity. Yet, the fact that contemporary Christian movements follow earlier forms of Christian religion, not an original ancestral religion, does not necessarily make Christianity a religion of 'tertiarity' or 'quaternarity'; the textual structure, rituals, and historical traditions of Christianity collapse such complexities, re-orienting believers to focus on what is ideally a transition from the old life to the new.

But is Christianity unique in its 'secondarity'? After all, conversion to any world religion involves a move away from some prior religion, and all world religion replaced, overlaid, or were integrated with localised religions that, like the traditional religion of the Pacific, centred on ancestor worship.

As I have read the papers in this Special Issue, I recall conversations I had some fifteen years ago with Solomon Islander Muslims who reflected on Christianity from the novel perspective of Islam (McDougall, 2009a). They did not put it in these terms, but much of what they critiqued about Christianity was its 'secondarity.' All of the Muslims I spoke to called Islam 'original' or 'natural' religion; they were not 'converts' but 'reverts.' Such terms come from within da'wah literature, indeed, from the Quran itself, but these ideas seemed to have been particularly compelling in contrast to Christianity's emphasis on overturning law and making life anew. An ex-Anglican Muslim I spoke to highlighted what we might see as Christianity's 'secondarity' in the very nature of God. He was particularly frustrated with the way Christianity imagined God as trinity—how is anyone supposed to understand that? Did Jesus come after God? Islam is simple, natural, and original: Allah is, and always has been, one. The critiques of Christianity from ex-evangelical Christians focused more on ideas of sin and redemption. By the time I spoke to them, these men, mostly from the island of Malaita, had moved from the South Sea Evangelical Church through many revival movements, operations, and churches that had buffeted Christian communities in Solomon Islands since the 1970s. Evangelical Christianity's promise of redemption, renewal, and revival seemed increasingly false—worse, an invitation to continually lapse into sin. 'Blood of Jesus all the way, then back to the nightclub', one older man said bitterly. Islam offered them a straight path—a single truth that had been there since the beginning. Islam did not compel them to move constantly back and forth from old to new, from sin to redemption. Echoing many of the arguments of their Malaitan brethren who had decided that their ancestors were the Jews of the Old Testament (Burt 1983; Timmer 2015), these men thought that Islam was really the religion of their ancestors: they pointed to lexical similarities between Arabic and Malaitan languages, to similar practices of gender segregation, and to an emphasis on law. Their ancestors may have forgotten monotheism and begun eating pork, but Christianity was to blame for destroying the true, original, and singular religion that they were re-embracing via Islam. Yet even as they spoke passionately about cultural continuity between ancestral tradition and Islam, it seemed to me that their stories were replicating the pattern of rupture—of 'secondarity'—they were complaining about.

Thus, Christianity is distinctive not because of the fact that it comes after other religions, but because of the way it continues to focus adherents' attention upon that which came before, compelling them to renew their faith, repent, and seek redemption. Contributors to this special issue track the ways that Christians in the nations of Papua New Guinea (Macdonald, Falck, Eves, Hermkens) and Solomon Islands (Macdonald) imagine and enact the temporal relation between past and present within a Christian culture.

This approach avoids many of the pitfalls of anthropological work that focused on a relationship *between* culture and Christianity. The most basic problem of these older approaches is the presumption that culture and Christianity are analytically distinct objects. If religion is a 'a cultural system' (Geertz, 1973), how is it possible to tease apart religion and

culture? This juxtaposition of culture and Christianity makes most sense if culture is implicitly understood to be indigenous, local, or traditional culture, and Christianity is assumed to be Western, European, and non-indigenous. Neither assumption is accurate in a world where the centre of gravity of Christianity is in the Global South, not Europe or 'the West' (Pew Research Center 2011). The tools of anthropology seem ill-suited to the task of teasing apart culture and Christianity; what anthropology can do, though, is explore the ways that Pacific Christians conceive of both of these terms. These papers show that, in some circumstances, Christians position culture as spatially, temporally, and morally distanced from Christianity, but in other circumstances, they claim radical continuity across the divide of conversion, envisioning ancestral culture and Christianity as identical. Either way, the distinction between past and present, culture and religion, is kept in the front of adherents' minds.

The articles also attend to differences within the Christian tradition, differences that, if taken seriously, undermine any attempt to generalise about Christianity and culture. Even within the same linguistic and cultural area—indeed, even within the same family—different forms of Christianity may orient people in dramatically different ways toward their ancestral traditions (Falck, this issue). When senior men of Ranongga Island in Solomon Islands, where I have done most of my fieldwork, joined the Methodist mission in the first half of the twentieth century, many carefully removed their ancestor's remains to the borders of the Christian community and undertook a final sacrificial ritual to instruct their ancestors to rest peacefully. When their close relatives a few kilometres away became Seventh-day Adventist around the same time, they threw skulls and shrine valuables into the sea (McDougall, 2016, pp. 91-123).

Recently, John Barker (2019) has critiqued prominent anthropological work for approaching Melanesians as 'converts' rather than as 'Christians'. Barker's focus is the so-called Robbins-Mosko debate, which centres on whether Pacific Christians are dividuals or individuals, and whether the relationship between cultural and Christianity is one of rupture or of continuity. He offers a particularly withering critique of Mosko's work (on Robbins, see McDougall 2009b), but his essay shows how this debate is more about an insular world of anthropological theory than it is about contemporary Melanesian life (but see Falck, 2019). Barker acknowledges that many anthropologists do not continue to treat Melanesians as converts, but instead understand Christianity to be an integral part of Melanesian life, not an external imposition. Somehow, though, it has been highly abstract claims about personhood that have received the most disciplinary attention.

Of course, it is not only anthropologists who are obsessed with conversion from indigenous religion to Christianity and with related questions about continuity and change. As Barker also observes, so too are many Pacific Christians. For many people of long-Christian areas of Island Melanesia, the story of the arrival of the first missionary provides a temporal, spatial, and moral anchor point for Christian communities (McDougall 2019). In this issue, Richard Eves observes that his long-Christian New Ireland interlocutors continue to imagine that conversion was dramatic transformation from a customary past to a Christian present and future. The reality he describes is far more complex, but this 'myth' of dramatic transformation shapes the actions of those born into Christianity. The Lelet communities where Eves has carried out research were missionized in the early twentieth century by

Methodists, who had an ambivalent attitude toward indigenous practices that stopped short of outright rejection. Like other Protestant churches, the United Church (successor to the Methodist mission) in New Ireland has felt effects of evangelical revival strongly and new churches have arisen that are more insistent on the need to break from past beliefs and practices. According to Eves, healing is a realm of life where people use techniques that derive efficacy from different sources: modern medicine, local powers, and from God. Yet any cure involving “the water of life” (a particularly efficacious cure strongly associated with Christian powers) must be carried out without any recourse to others. Eves calls attention to the contradiction between rhetoric and practice, and between normative stances and quotidian behaviour. Eves’ article underscores how concerned his Lelet interlocutors are with the position of culture within Christianity. They worry about “yo-yo” thinking—moving back and forth between dependence upon either Christian or traditional ritual and spiritual entities that are seen as morally incompatible.

The focus of the contributions here is less on conversion than on *revival*. If conversion is about an initial embrace of Christianity, revival is about making faith anew, often *within* Christianity. All four of the articles attest to the importance of revival movements that transformed historical mission Christianity in the 1970s and 1980s, an era when Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands were also gaining independence. The movement has been seen as a decolonisation of mission churches, one of the moment when local Christians took the reins from expatriate missionaries.

Fraser Macdonald focuses on a powerful evangelical Protestant revival that began in the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) of Solomon Islands in 1970s (2019, this issue). He carefully tracks its trajectory in time and space, from beginnings in Honiara and Malaita in the Solomons to many regions in Papua New Guinea via the Christian Leader’s Training College (CLTC) in the Western Highlands (now Jiwaka Province) of Papua New Guinea, where SSEC pastors regularly went for further training. This region-wide revival was the first form of Christianity that some Papua New Guineans experienced; more often, though, it swept through and transformed already-Christian communities, changing practices within existing churches and inspiring the birth of new churches (as is the case in the Lelet communities Eves describes). Macdonald argues that the regional revival movement linked up what otherwise might have been isolated upwellings of enthusiasm, each taking their own course; it provided these localised experiences with a common name (‘revival’) and a Pentecostal theological framework for interpreting the experiences. The leaders of this revival took a strongly ‘culture-rejecting’ stance toward local ways of life and saw Christianity in stark opposition to tradition. Although in some cases, people readily adopted novel practices, Macdonald argues that there is, nevertheless, an underlying ontological continuity. People of Malaita, he notes, had long been attentive to the way that ancestral spirits worked through dreams, visions, and prophecy; there was a long-standing tradition of spirit possession. In the Western Highlands, there are similarities between traditional forms of divination and Holy Spirit-guided efforts to uncover unconfessed sin; in Enga, old ritual sites were repurposed as prayer sites. Like other contributors in this Special Issue, Macdonald is attentive to the different levels on which one might discern continuity or change: ‘the experience of local people again reminds us that what may appear as continuity may, on the level of asserted meaning, actually be far reaching, radical change’ (Macdonald, this issue, p. xx).

Around the same time that this evangelical revival had begun to light up—and *link* up—Protestant communities around the western Pacific, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) was moving through Catholic communities across the region, including those of Bougainville discussed by Anna-Karina Hermkens and of the Sepik region discussed by Christiane Falck in this issue. The evangelical Protestant revival moved through regional evangelical networks and nodes of activity; the CCR moved through a decidedly global network. In the lightly or non-institutionalised evangelical revival, the ‘position of culture’ was worked out on the ground in quite diverse ways; in the Catholic Church, it was the subject of formal doctrine and recorded discussion. Hermkens outlines tensions around questions of culture as they played out through the global Church and in Bougainville. CCR emerged as the Church was seeking to integrate local practices and languages and encourage popular participation in worship. Yet these same official initiatives sought to delegitimize already-localized practices of devotions to saints, including the Virgin Mary: ‘The doctrinal reforms of Vatican II included the removal of popular devotions from the liturgy, thereby emphasising that the official public worship of God (the liturgy) is the centre of the Church’ (Hermkens, this issue, p. xx). In Bougainville, an Australian missionary, Father Dunn, introduced CCR to the region as part of these localising and popularising initiatives, while an indigenous Bougainvillean bishop and his successors were reluctant to officially recognise such a spirit-filled form of Catholic worship precisely because they worried that it resembled pre-existing beliefs in non-Christian spirit beings. The resonance between Christian and pre-Christian practices that might help to explain why charismatic worship appealed to Pacific Islanders is precisely the reason why these indigenous Christian leaders were so suspicious of these forms of worship.

In conflict-ridden Bougainville of the 1980s and 1990s, though, official Church support meant little: the diverse Catholic charismatic devotional movements remained relatively autonomous. Hermkens writes: ‘In the context of the civil war, the Catholic renewal informed a particular kind of ethno-theology, a liberation theology drawing upon ancestral connections to land and local notions of *kastom* to support a war’ (this issue, p. xx). Secession leader Francis Ona’s heterodox theology combined a pre-War anticolonial and anti-mission *kastom* movement with Catholic devotion focused on Mother Mary. This form of spiritual warfare was not directed inward at local territorial spirits, but at an ‘evil originating outside of Bougainville’; it sought to restore the holiness of an island despoiled by mining and violence.

In Bougainville, the politics at stake were the macro-political structures of succession and violent conflict. The ‘cosmo-ontological’ politics of a **Nyaura community in the middle Sepik** play out on a more micro-political scale, as Christiane Falck demonstrates (this Issue). Nyaura were late to embrace Catholicism, seeking out new sources of knowledge and power at the Chambri-headquartered mission only after their position in the regional network declined in the 1980s. Several forms of Christianity have moved through the community: first, the CCR, then the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (AOG), and then a quasi-denominational operation called Operation Joshua. Falck calls attention to the different stances that these versions of Christianity have toward a customary past. The young upstarts who overturned the power of their elders and rejected initiation ceremonies came to regret it later, particularly as the CCR sought to accommodate local spirits to Catholic

cosmology, suggesting that there is a single God with many names—names that Christians might have learned through the initiation rituals they spurned. Coming after this more past-affirming form of charismatic revival, the leader of Operation Joshua articulated a radical past-rejecting, ancestor-demonizing theology. The past that this operation sought to demolish was an ancient ancestral past, but the well-established Catholic culture of the area. Across such flux in attitudes toward the past, Falck discerns powerful continuity in the ways that Nyaura conceptualise the relationship between knowledge and power. Catholicism's pantheon was mapped onto Nyaura moeities, one taking the sign of Mother Mary and the other the child Jesus. Past and present, and in the context of traditional religion, Catholicism, and diverse forms of Pentecostalism, revealing hidden names has continued to be an essential part of the process through which ambitious men compelled others to embrace their view of the universe.

The articles collected here clearly move us well beyond futile debates about rupture or continuity by drilling into details of the way that people on the ground conceptualise continuity and rupture. Both Eves and Falck draw on long-term fieldwork to illustrate the ebbs and flows of different temporal ideologies through the communities they know best. Eves also underscores the way that people may see traditional practices as acceptable in some contexts but not others. Macdonald and Falck emphasize underlying ontological continuities that are discernible in the midst of efforts to enact a great break with the past. In contrast, Hermkens calls our attention to localised ethnotheologies that *claim* radical continuity with the past, linking worship of the Virgin Mary to Bougainville's matrilineal ideologies. Other examples of this continuity ideology are found among Pacific Islanders who imagine that their ancestors were Israelites (Newland and Brown, 2015)—or, in the case of the Solomon Islander Muslims I mentioned above, ancient Arabs (McDougall, 2009a). But such claims of radical continuity, like the ardent desires for complete rupture, are not evidence of actual socio-political or historical continuity. In many cases, they represent a profound break from a past defined for generations by Christianity. By documenting and interpreting the ways that Pacific Christians themselves understand the position of culture within Christianity, this Special Issue opens up possibilities for important new conversations.

This leads me to a final point I want to make in this Afterword, one that runs in a slightly different direction than the primary arguments of this collection. One of the curious features of the disciplinary subfield of the anthropology of Christianity is an absence of the voices of Pacific Islander scholars. This is not because Pacific Islanders are not engaged in the scholarly forums where such issues are developed. The Association of Social Anthropology in Oceania, where papers for this issue were developed, has an increasing number of Pacific Islands members who are active participants in both the meetings of the Association and its leadership. Yet these colleagues seem not to be drawn by questions about culture and Christianity as they have been framed so far. Conversely, with the important exception of Matt Tomlinson's recent work (2019, 2020), few anthropologists working within the anthropology of Christianity paradigm in the Pacific have seriously engaged the scholarship of Pacific theologians who *are* passionately interested in questions about the relationship between Christianity and culture. This is not because of a disciplinary disinterest in formal theology: there is a burgeoning body of work on the intersection of anthropology and theology (e.g., Robbins, 2006; Lemons, 2018; Bielo, 2019), but the

theologians whom anthropologists seem to engage with most intensely are primarily based in elite Euro-American institutions. Anthropologists who do engage with Pacific theologies tend to focus on 'ethnotheology'; highly localised, informal, and unsystematised, these theologies are more like data than they are theory.

I call attention to this lacuna not to critique the editors of this issue (to the extent it is a critique, it is a self-critique as much as anything else). To the contrary: it seems to me that the work here opens an intellectual space within anthropology where Pacific Christians themselves feel welcome and Pacific scholars may find interest. The contributors pay close attention to localised ethnotheology as it develops on the ground and in the context of particular political projects, but they also pay a new kind of attention to regional movements and enduring features of the Christian tradition that may also be of concern to Pacific scholars and Pacific Christians within and beyond the academy.

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