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## Who is strange(r)? A Pacific native muses over mission

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*I can't understand why many historians, sociologists and anthropologists still will not learn the languages of the people whose lives they are recording for posterity. Is it because they continue to believe that we, and our ways of life, are so easy to understand that they don't need to know our languages? Such historians, including the ardently Marxist missionaries – our self-appointed champions, need to decolonise themselves. – (Albert Wendt, of Samoa)<sup>1</sup>*

*When we resort to stereotyping and when we pigeonhole people, we are being very insensitive and are exhibiting great potential for mischief. Stereotyping is a form of mental laziness, where you don't want to find out anything yourself beyond the opinion given to you. All of us, you and I, can fall into this trap sometimes. – (Amin Maalouf, of Lebanon)<sup>2</sup>*

This article tosses and turns on the whirls of the Christian mission to the islands in the South Pacific Ocean. I look back over the paths of the mission with critical gratitude, and dare to hope for reincarnations of that mission which would kindle the agencies and creativities of generations to come. I look back because the hopes in the future are rooted in the past, and not because the past enslaves us in the present. My aim is not to delay the passing of the past, but to imagine the future of a mission that I, and three generations before me, have embraced and survived. I look back, musingly and at times a-musingly.

I am obliged to acknowledge that the musings I offer here are neither conventional nor typical of how natives of the South Pacific Ocean react to the Christian mission. My musings are more suggestive than comprehensive, with the expectation that conversations

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Wendt, "Novelists and Historians and the Art of Remembering" in Anthony Hooper *et al.* (eds.), *Class and culture in the South Pacific* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1987), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Amin Maalouf, "I see myself as a weaver of positive myths," an interview with A. Raganrajan, *The Hindu* (Chennai; Mar 27, 2008): 15.

on the future of the Christian mission will continue. There can be no finality when it comes to mission, for that only means its end, in other words, the mission has died.

### **Strangers at home**

The Christian mission disembarked on the shores of South Pacific islands with similar intentions as it did at other lands: to spread the message and cultures (gospel, good news) of Christianity and to establish the dominion of Christendom (by building and extending the church *qua* institution).<sup>3</sup> The former is the driving force behind evangelism<sup>4</sup> and the latter requires the luring of people into the Christian fold. Evangelism and conversion interlock, and the Western missionaries did not see the Christian mission as an exercise in proselytizing because they thought that they were salvaging natives from their savage ways.

From the beginning, Christian missionaries did not perceive the South Pacific *mission field* as a sea of vibrant spiritualities (so missionaries did not see themselves as stealing adherents of native religiosities) but as terrains of dark spirits (natives were perceived as driftwood tossed about by ferocious evil waves) that need to be tamed. Missionaries believed that they were doing our ancestors a favor: to free them from their godlessness. But our ancestors believed in gods (on land, such as rocks, birds, trees and totems, and in the sea, such as sharks, eels and turtles) and observed the sacredness of places (including *Pulotu* [“paradise”], which is on the horizon, and one gets there by following the path of the setting sun) and people, so they were both godly and religious. Our ancestors were non-Christians, but they were neither atheist nor irreligious.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Cao Shengjie, “Mission in the Chinese Church,” *Chinese Theological Review* 20 (2007): 1-23.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek root word for evangelism is *euangelion*, which is usually translated as “good news” or “gospel.”

With the arrival of the Christian mission, the natives became strangers at home. Natives were *stranger* (wordplay intentional) than the pale faces who steered the foreign religion which promised to both chart the right path and shine the light on lost souls, so the *identity of strangers* was drawn along racial and color lines. Westerners led the initial charge of the Christian mission and trained natives to carry further the dual tasks of spreading Christianity and expanding Christendom.<sup>5</sup> Native missionaries soon went from one island to other island groups.<sup>6</sup> From Tonga, for instance, Joeli Bulu went to Fiji and Semisi Nau to Samoa.

Whereas the strangers in the early days of the Christian mission were people with darker complexion, native pastors soon afterwards made indigenous people strangers to each other. The strangers were fellow islanders, and the line of division was along ethnic, rather than color and racial, differences.

The Christian mission to the South Pacific Islands was, and continues to be, for the sake of the Christian message and the establishment of the church, divisive at several fronts -- culturally, spiritually, ideologically, racially, ethnically, and so on. It would be helpful if future manifestations of the Christian mission appraise the barriers that cause these divisions, and embody the spirits of hospitality.

The Christian mission in the past made natives feel as if they were strangers in their own homes; the challenge for the mission in the future, now that Christianity is no longer as foreign as it was in the beginning, is to be more homily, to be more accommodating.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example A. Harold Wood and Margaret Reeson, *Overseas missions of the Australasian Methodist Church*. 5 Vols (1. Tonga and Samoa; 2. Fiji; 3. Fijian-Indian and Rotuma; 4. North India; 5. Papua New Guinea Highlands). Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Commission for Mission, 1987

<sup>6</sup> See John Garrett's trilogy published jointly by the Institute of Pacific Studies (University of the South Pacific, Suva) and the World Council of Churches (Geneva): *To live among the stars: Christian origins in Oceania* (1982); *Footsteps in the sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II* (1992); and *Where nets were cast: Christianity in Oceania since World War II* (1997).

Natives can make our own accommodations and our ancestors taught us how to build on sand. What we need is accommodating, rather than the confining accommodations of Christendom.

### **Mission of charity**

Christianity came as a mission of charity to the South Pacific Islands also. It was a mission of charity in the sense that, as noted above, missionaries were convinced that they were doing our ancestors a favor. They arrived as providers, seeking to manifest the will of God on earth as it is supposed to be in heaven, and our ancestors were supposed to be grateful.

*The Arrival (In his image)* (2004) by Emanuel Garibay,<sup>7</sup> artist and theologian from Philippines (north of our Southern sea of islands), conveys the mindset and expectations



of early missionaries. The natives, represented by a half-naked woman, were supposed to be grateful and to come bearing gifts to greet the missionary, who has arrived upon the shoulder of the colonizer. The feminizing of natives suggests that our ancestors were penetrable and so friendly that they would lie

back and welcome the missionary positions of the European visitors. The natives were the exotic object of, simple and available for the taking by, the missionary interest.

The Christian charity was presented in two forms: gift of the message (gospel) and gift of the church (including teaching and healthcare facilities), which was supposed to be

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<sup>7</sup> Emanuel Garibay's works are available online at <http://www.emmanuelgaribay.com/>. The link to *The Arrival (In his image)* is <http://www.emmanuelgaribay.com/mginhisimagesm.jpg> (April 03, 2008).

a gateway to modernity.<sup>8</sup> While gifting was part of native Pacific island cultures, the idea that one can receive a gift of words (message) was foreign. How does one hold and behold a message that comes in a foreign language? Missionaries came as valiant providers demanding acceptance and hospitality from people who live in, and require patience to build, relational cultures. The urgent needs of the missionaries could not be met by the laidback attitudes of islanders, and when push came to shove, as suggested by the knee of the colonizer pointing toward the groin of the native in Garibay's *The Arrival (In his image)*, the natives fought back.

Since the patrons of the Christian mission were of darker skin color than the fairer missionary "saviors,"<sup>9</sup> streams of racism flowed, then and now, at the underside of Christendom. Racism is the proverbial cat that has nine lives, and it has tamed the love of its owners. This was inherent both in the attitudes of the missionaries as well as in the resistance from the natives.

Tongans for instance resisted several early attempts by missionaries especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and it was in Tonga that missionaries from the London Missionary Society were first murdered. Christianity was not welcomed because there was suspicion about anything foreign that threatens to unsettle society,<sup>10</sup> but also because of the color and racial differences between natives and the invasive missionaries. Similar resistance occurred in neighboring islands. South Pacific island natives were not as grateful as missionaries had hoped. What else should one expect from a people whose home has been invaded and whose cultures assaulted and violated?

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), pp. 173-75.

<sup>9</sup> Missionaries from the West were fairer in skin color than native islanders, as were Polynesian local missionaries in comparison to the natives of Melanesian island nations.

<sup>10</sup> See also Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, pp. 171-88.

Eventually, the Christian mission won out, and Christianity has now reached all of the South Pacific island groups. The spread of Christendom was not without cost. The *gift* (charity) of the Christian mission was deadly to missionaries and natives both.<sup>11</sup> In Tonga, when Methodist missionaries John Thomas and John Hutchinson established the church in 1826 the Tongans were so guilt-ridden that their will to resist disintegrated. Such consequences could have been avoided if the Christian mission was more relational than charitable (with words), and if natives were not as brutal. Charity is useful. But charity can be harmful when it is a means of control and a tool for exploitation.

The Christian mission would have had different effects if it came with the intention to complement the cultures of sharing and reciprocity with which natives were accustomed, and if missionaries were willing to learn something from the natives. Part of the problem with missions of charity is that missionaries deem [darker-skin colored] patrons, by default, as unwise and needy. Christianity and its mission continue to churn storms of patronization, which we from the mission field experience even today. In general, and somewhat in principle also, white people from the West do *not* expect darker daughters and sons from the mission field to be able to think, create, construct, teach, and so forth.

It is now obvious that, as the postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak explored, we [*qua* subalterns] can indeed speak.<sup>12</sup> We can speak and even teach the speeches and ideologies of the Western Christian mission. Alas, neocolonialism! The follow-on concern that remains is whether the Christian mission can learn our languages, referring to both our dialects and our modes of thinking (so Wendt). We (as subalterns) have participated in

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The gift of death*. Trans. David Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

the project of contextualization, for the sake of the Western Christian mission, and await to see if the Christian mission can be more interested *in us* rather than in its dual task of spreading Christianity and Christendom. It is only when the Christian mission takes the second step that it can be truly contextual, for being contextual is not about interpreting Christianity and its traditions but about *interpreting life in concretely lived and realized context*.<sup>13</sup>

There have been constant efforts, coming especially from the so-called third world,<sup>14</sup> aimed at empowering the economically, politically, culturally and religiously oppressed and marginalized. Empowerment here means awakening the desire and power to resist subjugation so that the marginalized can make a difference; this dual form is what Felix Wilfred calls the *power as resistance and as creative agency*.<sup>15</sup> Can you imagine what the Christian mission would have been like if it was less *mission of charity* and more *mission of empowerment*?

## **Mission of control**

It is common nowadays to address and deplore the partnership of the Christian mission with Western colonization, which has been shorthand as “empire.”<sup>16</sup> Garibay’s *The*

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, pp. 2-21.

<sup>14</sup> Liberation theologies and cultural studies from Latin America and Africa, in both popular and academic circles, have led the charge in the call for empowerment. See for example works by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutierrez, Imuteleng Mosala, and many others. And in the area of biblical studies, R.S. Sugirtharajah has edited an expanded version of *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* which was issued by Orbis in 2006 (15 years after the first edition).

<sup>15</sup> “As those who suffer domination, Dalits are empowered in their resistance; to the extent they can ‘make a difference’, their power comes to expression as agency.” Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), p. 2.

“Empowerment of Dalits happen when their disqualified cultural knowledge and experiences are unleashed to set right the distortions of truth by the power of domination.” *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Culture: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) and Karen L. Bloomquist (ed), *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2007). The United Church of Canada (UCC) brings this concern, applied to contemporary forms of empire, to its congregations through bible studies and workshops. UCC



*Arrival (In his image)* (2004) does this well, portraying the “man of the red hood,”<sup>17</sup> with his round spectacles and long nose (characteristic of persons who have native mixed with Western blood), as if he piggybacked on the colonizer. He holds a cross in his left hand, which also functions as a rod for his support.

The colonizer is clean-shaven and wears a crown. He holds an image of himself in which he wears a crown of thorns, as if to suggest that “the message” of the Christian mission reflects the colonizer himself. Interestingly, the colonizer holds a posture that is pregnant with meanings. His right hand reaches for his chin, as if he is thinking, but his eyes roll away from the approaching [granddaughter-like] native, whose head bows and eyes close in a submissive gesture. He points his right index finger and his eyes to the man of the hood, but his thumb points at himself, as if he is wondering if the native is coming because of him or the one on his shoulder, behind him. And in the framed image of himself, his hand is in the form of a pistol. At the background is the vessel that brought the new arrivals, which seems to float in a stormy horizon.

Garibay’s *The Arrival (In his image)* brings to mind the Flood story, in which the Ark represented safety for a selected number of persons and animals but destruction for the rest of the creation. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bible illustrator Gustave Doré made a similar point in his *The world destroyed by water*, in which the plight of the victims of the Flood is more piercing because of the safety represented by Noah’s ark, which floats at the

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issued *Worshipping Faithfully in the Midst of Empire* in 2007 and *Challenging Empire* resources (focusing on issues related to children, inter-generations, communities, and so forth) are planned for 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Is this figure a reminder of the story of Red Riding Hood? Are we not welcomed to see in this character the wolf who pretends to be the innocent granddaughter (who picks flowers and brings food for her grandmother) to gain entry to her grandmother’s house, then he eats the grandmother and waits for the girl to arrive?

background.<sup>18</sup> In this connection, “the arrival” of colonization with the Christian mission marked the drowning of the world.

It is naïve however to lay the blame for the destructive effects of “the arrival” only on the colonizer. The Christian mission is a form of colonization also, especially when seen from cultural and religious perspectives. In most of the Southern sea of islands, many of the religious practices from pre-contact times have ceased. They are neither practiced nor recalled by many in my generation, and they will soon be forgotten. Their discontinuation is the outcome of the empire-like uprooting enforced by the Christian mission. I feel that Arundhati Roy’s call is relevant here also: we need “to lay siege to it [i.e., Empire but I apply it to Christendom also], to shame it, to mock it: with our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories.”<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Roy too is an apostle of the mission of empowerment!

At the roots of the Christian mission is a delusional sense of superiority. Missionaries proclaim that they came to clean up and save the natives by civilizing and converting them into Christianity, but under the surface is the inability to deal with differences hence the drive to control the Other. If Christian missionaries were able to deal with differences, why would they want to convert our ancestors to their religion (and crowd up their sacred space)?

The illusion of superiority combined with the obsession with control is a symptom of deep insecurity, the concoction under the influence of which Western colonization and the Christian mission arrived. These have disembarked on our shores, but they have not

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<sup>18</sup> See discussion of two works by Doré on the Flood in my “Pleasure and grief, in violence” in Jonathan Inkpin (ed.), *Religion and Violence* (Adelaide: ATF, 2007), pp. 71-84.

<sup>19</sup> Arundhati Roy, “Confronting Empire” in *War Talk* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2003), p. 112.

been fully unpacked. The Christian mission has not “emptied its pockets,” and daughters and sons of natives have yet to “natively (rather than naïvely) pick” on the Christian mission. This article is a step toward the latter, which has a double meaning: first, natives need to *pick in the sense of unpacking and critiquing* the Christian mission, and second, natives need to *pick in the sense of consciously deciding to accept* the Christian mission. Most of us were born into Christian families, and habit made us Christians. We have not been empowered to embrace our Christian faith critically, as was Babasaheb Ambedkar, one of the champions of the Dalits in India, when he chose Buddhism over Hinduism: “I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is my power.”<sup>20</sup>

This article *natively picks* on the Christian mission in the footsteps of Felix Wilfred of India: “Religion in general, Christianity and theology in particular, will become credible when and to the extent they are able to meet the subalterns on their ground, support them in their critique and accompany them in the struggle for the realisation of their utopias.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Mission of holiness**

The Christian mission bears the marks and scars of Judeo-Christian monotheism, which was also one of the driving forces behind the colonial program of the Western empire (so Wilfred). Whether monotheism is healthy for the natives of the Southern sea of islands, then and now, is a contested issue. That very much depends on whom one engages in the conversation!

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia* (Delhi: ISPCCK, 2005), p. 15. Wilfred explains, “Utopia is not an unreal figment of imagination, or a chimera we chase in futility. It is the projection of another order of things, a different set of values, and a new shape of the world and society. The suppressed identities, women, minorities of every kind, Dalits and tribals and all those who are marginalised in any way, project their utopias” (*Ibid*, p. 14).

Monotheism seeks to discredit and undermine other divinities in order to present God as the solution – *Deus ex machina* – to all human needs and problems. It is common these days to hear, especially in conservative evangelical circles, the catchphrases “Jesus is the answer” and “DWJWD: Do What Jesus Would Do.” The upshot is that such monotheistic biases blind Christians from realizing and responsibly engaging the gifts in other cultures. These blinded worldviews fail to notice that God, as Elijah discovered in the cave (1 Kings 19), also comes in the form of questions and in disturbing silences.

The appropriateness of monotheism is limited for people in lands that continue to be multi-religious, like the nations of Asia, as well as in the worlds of the poor, in Asia and beyond. Felix Wilfred unpacks the latter as follows:

The poor love plurality because they find in it a place for themselves. Even more importantly, they find themselves acknowledged and affirmed. Difference is very important for their life and survival. Abolishing differences and diversity is a programme of domination, whereas affirmation of difference is the way of victims. God is on the side of victims and, therefore, She shares with them the language of difference, and She is most at home with it. The victims of domination care to distinguish themselves from others, particularly so, when assimilationist policies are imposed on them as a solution to their problems. In this situation, affirmation of difference is a weapon against false integration. Difference also becomes entitlement, especially when this difference is the result of a history of discrimination and disadvantages. Assertion of difference, more importantly, is the way by which marginal peoples come to consciously perceive and acknowledge their collective selves. *Difference*, in other words, is crucial for construction of their subjecthood as principal agents of their own emancipation. In the struggles of the poor to assert their difference, we discern God’s language of plurality in operation.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of *difference* is appropriate for the natives of the Pacific Ocean also. I am often amused when a *pālangi* or *haole* (non-native) speaks of “Pacific Islanders” as if we are a homogeneous and mono-cultural group. We are too different between ourselves to

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<sup>22</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, p. xvi.

be lumped together in the same box. Distinct differences are evident between the natives of the three main ethnic groups -- Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia -- with regard to customs, practices and values. There are differences and sometimes animosities even between people within the same ethnic group, as between the Polynesian natives of Niue, Samoa and Rotuma. Notwithstanding, there are inter-mixing and continuities between these groups, as in the Tikopia (Polynesian) people who live amongst the predominantly Melanesian people of the Solomon Islands. Put simply, the natives of the islands in the Pacific Ocean are too complex for reductionists. The Christian mission nonetheless ignored the differences between natives, and this is a symptom of monotheistic biases blinding missionaries from seeing diversity between people of other cultures.

As the monotheistic God is above and beyond all other powers, so are adherents urged to separate themselves from worldly authorities. In religious language, separation (or, set apart) is the basis of teachings about holiness. Adherents are admonished to be holy as the monotheistic God is holy, setting themselves apart from other people in the world. In Wesleyan circles, Holiness Clubs gathered, sowing the seeds for religious discrimination.

The monotheistic and holiness teachings of the Christian mission have contributed toward establishing Us-versus-Them cultures. These have done much damage to peoples the world over. I hope that in the future the *mission of holiness* will make room for what might be called a *mission of performance and participation*. The latter would be more effective in community building.

The *mission of performance and participation* that I have in mind engages the *energy (māfana, mana) of dancing* that vibrates in South Pacific Island circles.<sup>23</sup> When natives perform cultural dances, those are not solely for the sake of entertainment. Tourists have misunderstood us thus far. Our dances also tell our stories, and performances exude *energy* when they draw observers to participate in dancing. Each performance is therefore an invitation for participation, in the movements and the melodies as well as in the telling of our stories and charting our future through our memories.

One of the cultural practices that Western missionaries denounced upon their arrival was dancing, which they associated with worship, and so they did not get to experience the *energy (māfana, mana)* of our ancestors. It is not too late for the mission to engage this kind of energy, but it will require supplementing its mission of holiness with one of performance and participation. This will make the Christian mission less controlling and more playful, for there is no script when people join a performance. I imagine that the mission will become more spiritual if this was to materialize.

### **Mission of the book**

The African anecdote about the colonizing effect of the Christian mission deserves another telling. This anecdote is most effective when heard with the voices of indigenous Black Africans, accenting the arrival of white missionaries. When the missionaries demanded, “Let us pray,” they all closed their eyes and bowed their heads. At the end of the prayer, they said “Amen” and opened their eyes to find the bible in their hands. For this, Black Africans rejoiced. But they soon realized that the white missionaries have

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<sup>23</sup> So Kelly Johnson-Hill, “Inner exhilaration and speaking truth through metaphor: An exploration of the theological significance of *māfana* and *heliaki* in Tongan dance” (unpub).

grabbed their land. Africans end up gaining the bible of Christianity, but white Europeans now possess their land.

The South Pacific Island anecdote is slightly different. We too joined the missionaries in prayer, but after we said “Amen”, we saw the missionaries grasping the bible more tightly. White Europeans took some of our land and kept control over the Christian book, in the sense that Europeans were in charge of both the translation<sup>24</sup> and the interpretation of the bible. Even today, native theological students and pastors train to use European methods of interpretation. To understand the bible “rightly,” South Pacific island natives have to read and think as if we are Europeans, and we learned to uphold the worldviews of Western missionaries. If Lamin Sanneh (of Gambia) is correct that the “[e]nd of the colonial era is also the end of the missionary era,”<sup>25</sup> than neither has ended for us. South Pacific island natives still live as if we are in the missionary era in our worship practices (esp. hymns and liturgies) and in relation to the bible (with evangelical church- and nation-building interpretations).<sup>26</sup>

The “religion of the book” attribute of Christianity sustains the foreignness of this religion to the oral cultures of the South Pacific Islands. The bible remains a foreign

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<sup>24</sup> Missionaries claimed that they mastered the native languages of the Pacific Islands as well as the biblical languages, but there are murmurs among natives that this was not so. Missionaries did use native people (in Tonga, for instance, were Tevita Finau, Lesieli and Tevita Tonga, and others) to do translation work and they consulted English translations of the bible.

<sup>25</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> The Christian bible has been influential in shaping South Pacific Island cultures. In my home island of Tonga, for instance, the first biblical books translated into our native language were the *Books of Samuel*. I suspect that the stories of David and the united monarchy influenced Taufa'āhau to unify the island group of Tonga under the reign of one ruler. There were three lines of chiefly “kings” prior to the arrival of Christianity, each reigning over different areas and serving particular functions. It was after the arrival of Christianity that Taufa'āhau (previously, king of the Kanokupolu line) centralized the governing of the island group, with the blessings of the missionaries, whose mission benefitted from the unification of the nation. Taufa'āhau even took on an English name, King George I. The church used the bible in the interests of the reigning royal family, and it is not by accident that Tonga continues to be a monarchical nation. This is one of the products, and a pawn, of Christendom.

European book to us. The cry for contextualization in the 1960s goes on even today.

Christianity and the bible came in western vessels, and there is a desire to transplant those into local cultures and realities (“soil”). Two critical questions remain begging: In and for whose interests should we localize Christianity and its bible? At who’s cost?

The role of the bible in colonizing the minds of native people haunts me (a biblical critic by training) still. Why should the bible, which comes as a foreign book with non-indigenous stories, principles and teachings, receive more credibility over local stories, legends and customs? Why should the European rigid book culture take more precedence over flexible indigenous oral cultures? A simple answer suggests that the power of the Christian book was enhanced by the gun held in the other hand of missionaries cum colonizers.

As long as emphasis falls on Christianity as a “religion of the book,” *readers* will be required to use the hermeneutical tools from the West which the Christian mission favors. What we need, taking into account the interests of Pacific Island cultures, is first of all to acknowledge the foreignness of the bible to our cultures and, second, to supplement the Western bookish line of thinking. We need to shift our attention from focusing on *book and reading* (the realm of hermeneutics) to *story and telling*, subjects that vibrate in oral cultures. To shift from *reading* to *telling*, in a way, in other words, is to let missionaries keep their bible and hermeneutical tools but to encourage native Pacific Islanders, and others, to rewrite those stories through our *tellings*.<sup>27</sup> To shift from *reading* to *telling* is to

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<sup>27</sup> I started exploring this shift in a series of lectures in Mangalore, Nagpur and Chennai (India), Tainan (Taiwan), Montpellier (France) and Seoul (South Korea) and in “Telling as if a local: Toward homing the bible outside western [main]streams,” *Journal of St. Joseph Catholic Seminary* (forthcoming). This turn to *telling*, and the writing of this article, took place during my Sabbatical Leave (January-June 2008), thanks to the generosity of the Council of United Theological College.



free the message of Christianity from the burden of translation and give its adherents the opportunity to be engaging.<sup>28</sup>

Christian mission in the future (bearing in mind that it is only through the eyes of the present that we can meaningfully anticipate the future, and find meanings in the past) need to take into account the place of the bible in its dual tasks of spreading Christianity and expanding Christendom. It would be helpful in this regard to engage thinkers who are not imprisoned by Western modes of interpretations, and interests, but who are open to the *gifts of orality and the power of telling*, in addition to *the power of stories*.

### **Home mission**

I have taken the Christian mission seriously in my musings, imagining ways in which we might complement its strengths and account for its burdens and blind spots. My musings also took the realities and contexts of the South Pacific islands seriously, though I made more references to the Tongan situation and I did not quote resources written by native writers. This is because I received the invitation for and wrote this article while overseas, away from my native library. Maybe it is better this way!

I shall not revisit the suggestions made above for the future of the Christian mission, but bring this article to a close island-wise, with a *telling* story, and I invite readers to participate in its telling.

This telling is about a crosscultural congregation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, in which the Tongan youth and children are lively, playing and running around, filling the church property with noise and life. Now and then, often, actually, things break. A window breaks. The foot of a table bends. A door won't shut. The toilet blocks. The walls are

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<sup>28</sup> See also my "Is there a home for the bible in the postmodern world?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42.4 (Fall 2007): 547-559.

marked, the pews receive scratches and the carpet is stained. And so on, and so forth. Over, and over again. And again!

At one Church Council meeting, some of the elderly *pakehā* (white, non-native) members of the congregation expressed their concern for the damages. They complained that *the Tongans treat the church as if it was their home*. They run around and break things as if they were in their own houses.

In response, the Tongans explained that their youth and children break things because *they do not feel at home in the church*. When they are at home, they are careful and they are not reckless.

How might things stop breaking, as they did in the homes of our ancestors?