

METHODIST ENCOUNTERS WITH OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IN 'THE SOUTHERN WORLD'

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Abstract: Methodist work began in 'the Southern World' in 1811 with the preaching ministry of Edward Eagar in the colony of New South Wales and was reinforced in 1815 by the arrival of the first Wesleyan missionary Samuel Leigh. Early attempts to reach the Australian Aborigines by William Walker between 1821 and 1825 met with little success. The Maori people of New Zealand and the Pacific Islanders of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa proved much more open to Methodist missionary work so that a relatively strong Methodist work was established throughout many parts of the Pacific by the late nineteenth century. Wesleyans also established a successful mission to the Chinese people of the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. This paper will explicitly address Methodist missionary responses to the religious beliefs encountered in 'the Southern World' of the nineteenth century. It will seek to discover to what extent these religious beliefs were dismissed as pagan and superstitious and to what extent there was any attempt to understand these beliefs on their own terms. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the Wesley and Methodist Historical Studies Working Group in its attempt to understand how 'Methodist missionary enterprises represented and communicated with persons from other religious traditions and other cultures.' It will also assist the broader project in which I am engaged, along with Professor Hilary Carey of the University of Newcastle (NSW) of publishing a new scholarly history of Methodism in Australia.

Introduction

The inaugural meeting of The Wesleyan Auxiliary Mission Society for New South Wales convened on 5 July 1820 and in its first Annual Meeting on 1 October 1821 noted with 'lively interest' and with 'with joy' the establishment of missions to the South Sea Islanders and to the Australian Aborigines.¹ These two areas of missionary endeavour would result in quite divergent responses, however, with the peoples of the Pacific Islands proving to be much more open to the Methodist message than were Indigenous Australians. In addition to engaging the native peoples of Australasia and the Pacific, the Wesleyans were the most successful group to engage in mission toward the 30,000 Chinese people who were in the Australian colonies on the eve of Federation (1901).² This paper will focus explicitly on the response to some of the religious beliefs Methodists encountered in the Southern World in the nineteenth century. It does not attempt to be comprehensive but discusses a selection of encounters that might be taken as representative. It will show that the overall response to such religious beliefs was largely a very negative one. This will perhaps not surprise any informed student of this period, but it is hoped that this study will lay the groundwork for further research into a second stage of missionary encounter in the twentieth century that evidenced a more positive engagement with 'other' religious beliefs in the Southern World.

¹ *First Report of the Wesleyan Auxiliary Missionary Society for New South Wales for 1821* (Sydney: Robert Howe, 1822), p. 9.

² The figure comes from the SBS television series *Immigration Nation*, episode 1.

I. Indigenous Australians

Though the Rev. William Walker was appointed to serve as a missionary to the Aborigines in 1820, the earliest efforts of Methodists to reach the First Australians with the Gospel were an abject failure. In this they were little different from other denominations.³ Certainly the earliest Wesleyan preachers in NSW had a low view of the capacities of the Aborigines. Walter Lawry considered them ‘of all the heathen tribes...the lowest.’⁴ In 1818 Lawry spoke with some Aboriginal people at Portland Head, NSW. They rejected his view of the resurrection of the body, stating ‘When black men die, never no more, never no more.’ On Lawry’s estimate they manifested no knowledge of God, and no desire to learn of it. When he read to them from the Bible they simply laughed and walked away.⁵

William Walker’s mission bore little fruit.⁶ In 1823 he baptised the son of the famous companion of Governor Arthur Phillip, Bennelong, christening him ‘Thomas Walker Coke.’ Thomas showed early promise; according to Walker, ‘He learned to read his Bible in about three months [and] his ‘attention to class and prayer-meeting was very great and encouraging.’ Sadly, Thomas died soon after of an undiagnosed illness. Speaking to an older Aboriginal man he said, ‘Well brother; I shall die today, goodbye,’ then kissed the older man and died in his arms. ‘The poor blacks are so superstitious,’ wrote Walker, ‘that they believe the place where one has died to be equally fatal to themselves; and so they fret as to be disordered, and often die in consequence.’ This seems to have been exactly what happened to ‘Jemmy’ who died shortly after Thomas, again for no apparent reason.⁷ Through sorcery ‘clever men’ could ‘sing’ a person to death even from remote locations or ensure the death of an enemy by ‘pointing the bone.’⁸ Walker seems to have had some knowledge of this, writing in 1824, ‘The blacks believe their death to be occasioned by the malice and

³ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity* (Sydney: Albatross, 1990), 23-82; Jean Wilmington, ‘Writing on the Sand,’: The First Missions to Aborigines in Eastern Australia,’ in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, eds. *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions 1988), 77-92.

⁴ Walter Lawry to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), 15 July 1819, Bonwick Transcripts, State Library of NSW, Box 50, p. 458. The valuable early correspondence available on microfilm in the Missionary Papers of the Bonwick Transcripts in the Mitchell Reading Room at the State Library should be approached with some degree of caution as the original correspondence has in some cases been corrupted by Bonwick’s transcription of them. Early correspondence with the WMMS and Minutes are housed at the Methodist Missionary Society Archives in London, and available on microfilm, (IDC Microform Publishers, 1991), H-2720 – H-2721. I accessed the microform copies at the Camden Theological Library in North Parramatta, NSW.

⁵ James Colwell, *The Illustrated History of Methodism*, 170-171. For a collection of essays on the nature of traditional Aboriginal religion see Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Dianne Bell and Kenneth Maddock, eds. *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984).

⁶ Harris, *One Blood*, 49-51.

⁷ MSS letter, Mitchell Library, Bonwick transcriptions 53, folio 217, 2918, cited in Gloster S. Udy, *Spark of Grace: The Story of the Methodist Church in Parramatta and the Surrounding Region* (Parramatta, Epworth Press, 1977), 93-94. For an insightful and original treatment of the relationship between Governor Arthur Phillip and Bennelong see Inga Clendinin, *Dancing with Strangers: Europeans and Australians at First Contact* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ Henry Reynolds, ‘Aboriginal Sorcery,’ La Trobe University podcast <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2008/podcasts/aboriginal-sorcery-with-professor-henry-reynolds/transcript>, accessed 5 April, 2013.

craftiness of the opposite tribes, who – unseen, unfelt – puncture with a poisonous dart the side opposite the heart. No sign of the puncture is felt, but in consequence thereof he dies.’⁹ Any opportunity for Walker to learn more about Aboriginal religion came to an end when he was suspended from the mission in 1825 after accepting a grant of land from the Governor and becoming superintendent of the Parramatta female orphan institution without the consent of Conference. Though John Harris credits Walker with being well liked by the Aborigines and with having gained ‘considerable local knowledge,’ our access to this knowledge is hampered by the fact that, at his own request, Walker’s journals and notes were destroyed upon his death in 1855.¹⁰

David Roberts and Hilary Carey have examined John Hunter’s mission to the Aborigines in the Wellington Valley between 1824 and 1826, at that time a remote area of central NSW. The first frontier mission of its type in Australia, it had good prospects in its initial stages but was criticised by its opponents who called Hunter’s integrity into question.¹¹ Hunter shared the same low opinion of Aboriginal religion as Walker had done before him.

The Aborigines of New Holland are the most wretched of the human race. They have no form of Government and therefore no laws by which to regulate their actions... This truly wretched race have no religion whatever. They have scarcely any idea of a Supreme Being, and they have no religious ceremonies at all. They have some obscure notions of a future state of existence, but it is doubtful whether they have not divined them from the whites. Many things the blacks have not, but they have immortal souls, and these immortal souls may be improved by the precepts of education and the power of religion.¹²

Clearly this evidences a very Eurocentric understanding of what constitutes religious belief. Indigenous people certainly had religious beliefs even if such beliefs were not discernable by European eyes. Though Hunter was given access to the religious rituals and mythology of the Eora people there is little evidence in his journal that he understood much of what he heard and observed. He believed that the Eora word ‘Moorooberrai’ referred to a supreme being associated with thunder, but a later missionary questioned this translation. His claims to have mastered enough of the local language to translate most of the first chapter of Genesis, and to have managed to reform Aboriginal conduct in light of the judgement of the world to come, were thought by his contemporaries to be greatly exaggerated.¹³

During the 1830s and 1840s a great deal of legislation was enacted to ensure Aborigines received government protection from the ravages that European settlement inevitably brings. In 1838, the Methodist George Augustus Strong was appointed Chief Protector of the Aborigines in the Port Philip District (Melbourne), assisted by

⁹ William Walker, MSS letter, 15 March 1824, cited in Udy, 95.

¹⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 51.

¹¹ David A. Roberts and Hilary M. Carey, ‘Beong! Beong!’ (‘More! More!’): John Harper and the Wesleyan Mission to the Australian Aborigines, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 10 (2009).

¹² John Harper, Journal entry 11 July, 1825, in ‘Correspondence- Australia 1812-1826,’ WMMS Archives, School of African and Oriental Studies, London [DC Box 1, H-2721, WMMS 514, fiche 1-21], cited in Roberts and Carey.

¹³ *Sydney Gazette*, 29 September 1825, cited in Roberts and Carey. Harris, *One Blood*, 50.

Sub-Protectors who had been Methodist schoolmasters. In that same year, the Rev. Joseph Orton established the 'Buntingdale' mission on the Barwon River southwest of Geelong, managed by the young Cornishman, Reverend Francis Tuckfield.¹⁴ Orton, Strong, and Tuckfield seem to have acted out of a genuine, albeit paternalistic, motive of compassion. Their concern to 'protect' the Aborigines from the depredations of white influence was well meaning but what they failed to see was that this could never compensate for the loss of culture.

It was not land that the Aborigines wanted; they wanted their own lands where their ancestors had lived since the 'Dream Time' – a sacred cosmos in which the natural features, the flora and fauna of the landscape around them were imbued with their sense of history and religion. An arbitrarily chosen reserve could not provide them with this.¹⁵

The Rev. John Smithies, his wife Hannah and their four children arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia early in June 1840.¹⁶ Smithies took the trouble to learn the Nyungar language and culture, with the help of Methodist mission teacher Francis Armstrong and his wife Mary.¹⁷ Smithies moved the Aboriginal Mission from Perth to York in 1851 but after failing to succeed it was closed in 1854.¹⁸ In that same years during his deputation from the British Conference to set up an independent Australasian Wesleyan Conference, the Rev. Robert Young spoke of the Indigenous people of the Swan River Colony [Western Australia] as 'the most degraded and loathsome specimens of human nature' he had ever seen.¹⁹ Yet there was also compassion and sympathy. 'I could not but deeply lament that so little...had been done by the Christian Church to save this miserable and greatly injured people...Are the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia not men? Has not the God of love included them in the world's redemption?'²⁰

Other than Lorimer Fison's (1832-1907) investigation into Aboriginal kinship and marriage systems in the 1890s,²¹ Methodist understanding of Aboriginal culture was very limited during this period, due in part to the lack of success experienced by missionaries. In 1914, the Rev. Joseph Bowes, former president of the Methodist Church of Queensland spoke of the 'inexcusable neglect' of Methodists toward the

¹⁴ Alex Tyrrell, *A Sphere of Benevolence: The Life of Joseph Orton, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary (1795-1842)* (Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 1993), 139-158.

¹⁵ Tyrrell, *A Sphere of Benevolence*, 190.

¹⁶ William McNair and Hilary Rumley, *Pioneer Aboriginal Mission* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1981). 32.

¹⁷ John Smithies to Wesleyan Missions, London, 8 October 1840. MN 172 ACC 2309 A/1 Methodist Church of Australasia W. A. Conference Records.

¹⁸ It would be almost one hundred years before Aboriginal work in Western Australia recommenced when Rev Ern Clarke was inducted on 8 August 1951 as superintendent of the Mogumber Methodist Mission. *The West Australian*: 8 August 1951, 7.

¹⁹ Robert Young, *The Southern World: Journey of a Deputation from the Wesleyan Conference to Australia and Polynesia including Notes on the Visit to the Gold Fields* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1854), 60-61.

²⁰ Young, *The Southern World*, 110-11.

²¹ Lorimer Fison, 'On the Classificatory System of Relationships,' *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 24 (1895): 361-71; Fison and A.W. Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai: Group Marriage and Relationship, drawn chiefly from the Usage of the Australian Aborigines, etc.* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1880); H. Gardner, 'By the Facts we add to our Store:' Lorimer Fison, Lewis Henry Morgan and the Spread of Kinship Studies in Australia,' *Oceania* 79:3 (2009): 280-92.

Aborigines. 'The Methodist Church of Australia is not represented by any agent in this work. Her interest in the aborigines would appear to have evaporated, through her failure during the first half of the nineteenth century.'²² Only at a later stage, from the 1920s to the 1950s would Methodist missionary work, especially in the Northern Territory, begin to bear fruit and evince a deeper understanding of and respect for Indigenous beliefs.²³ Even during this later and more fruitful stage, the fact that Aboriginal missionary work came under the responsibility of Methodist Overseas Mission further underscored the sense of 'otherness.' Aborigines were seen as a foreign people even in their own country. Methodist Overseas Mission would take care of Aborigines while the Methodist Inland Mission confined itself to settler communities in the remote areas of the bush. There is a deep irony in this, since it was the Aborigine who was 'in country' and the missionary who was not really 'at home.'

II. New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders

When the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australasia was formed in 1855, with autonomy from the British Conference, it adopted a Pacific regional model. New Zealand (by this time a Crown colony having separated from New South Wales in 1841), Tonga, Samoa and Fiji, were all integrated into the General Conference and guaranteed delegates. A Board of Missions based in Sydney would administer the various Pacific missions. The Maori people of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific Islanders of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa proved much more open to Methodist missionary work than the Australian Aborigines so that a strong Methodist work was established throughout most parts of the Pacific by the late nineteenth century.

The Rev. Dr George Brown (1835-1917), who had immigrated to New Zealand from Devon in 1855, is a towering figure in Pacific missions.²⁴ After spending fourteen years in Samoa he established Methodist missions in New Guinea in 1875, utilising the gifts of Fijian and Samoan missionaries. In 1891 Australian Methodists were given responsibility for the eastern islands of New Guinea under the leadership of the Rev. William Bromilow, formerly a missionary to Fiji.²⁵ The first contingent of missionaries arrived on the tiny island of Dobu in the D'Entrecasteaux group off the south-eastern tip of the mainland. This was a sizable group of sixty-nine people only

²² Joseph Bowes, 'The Australian Aborigine', in James Colwell (ed.), *A Century in the Pacific* (Sydney: William Beale, 1914), 172.

²³ Rev. T. T. Webb, *Spears to Spades* (Sydney: Department of Overseas Missions, 1938), 35-38; Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, 'Body and Soul: More than an Episode!' in Swain and Rose, *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, 44-73.

²⁴ Margaret Reeson, *Pacific Missionary George Brown: 1835-1917* (Canberra: Australia National University EPress, 2013). <http://epress.anu.edu.au> accessed 28 June 2013. An extensive collection of George Brown's papers is held at the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales, included ten volumes of journals describing his missionary experiences, seven letter books, fifteen miscellaneous volumes of correspondence and papers, 1,287 photographs taken by Brown, of life in Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Samoa, and the original manuscript of Brown's autobiography (1908). http://www.ampltd.co.uk/collections_az/Pacific-Brown/highlights.aspx, accessed 5 April 2013.

²⁵ For a history of Methodism in New Guinea see Neville Threlfall, *One Hundred Years in the Islands: The Methodist / United Church in the New Guinea Islands Region 1875-1975* (Rabaul: The United Church, 1975). Also Margaret Reeson, Neville Threlfall, Garry W. Trompf et al., 'The Methodist Missions,' in *Integral Work: Essays on the History of Missions and Development in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands*. Ed. S. Latukefu et al (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2013).

eight of whom were Europeans. There were ten Samoans, four Tongans, six Fijian couples with a total of twelve children, and nine unmarried Fijian men.

The religious idea that lay behind the mission was the transformation of Melanesian culture through the introduction of Christian presence and teaching. This was exemplified by Bromilow who stated it thus: 'We aimed at saving...not by reconstructions from without but by regeneration from within; we sought not to abolish but to redeem.'²⁶ The means to that end were to successfully introduce Methodist teaching and practice.²⁷

This missiological principle of respecting rather than replacing culture seems not to have been followed in the subsequent development of the mission. David Hilliard has found that the broad church liberal theology of the Church of England's Melanesian Mission gave Anglican missionaries in the southwest Pacific a greater respect for indigenous religious beliefs in contrast to the hostility toward traditional religion exhibited by the South Sea Evangelical Mission in the Solomon Islands and the Presbyterian mission in Vanuatau. As for Methodist missionaries in the Solomons, they 'were doers rather than thinkers.'²⁸

Notwithstanding this assessment, much fruitful interaction with traditional Pacific religion came through ethnographic studies in the late nineteenth century and Methodist missionaries were often at the forefront of such research. Methodist missionaries in both German and British New Guinea wrote, in 1892, the first assessment of the importance of totemism in traditional Melanesian cultures.²⁹ George Brown wrote the first comparative study of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples informed by his acquisition of several local languages and almost fifty years field experience in the islands.³⁰ Inevitably such studies led to a greater respect for and appreciation of the complex religious beliefs of the peoples of the Pacific. An examination of these diverse beliefs across the entire Pacific lies beyond the scope of this paper. I have chosen to limit my discussion in this section, therefore, to the religious beliefs of the Maori people of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The Wesleyan Missionary Society commenced work in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1818, the Rev. Samuel Leigh (also the pioneer missionary in Australia) being its first worker. This was followed by the Wesleyan Maori Mission in 1822. Both Anglicans and Wesleyans saw considerable success so that by 1840 half the Maori people of the

²⁶ W. E. Bromilow, *Twenty Years among Primitive Papuans* (New York, 1977), 113.

²⁷ Ross Mackay, 'A Church in Papua or a Papuan Church?: Conservatism and Resistance to Indigenous Leadership in a Melanesian Mission,' in Phyllis Herda, Michael Reilly, and David Hilliard, eds. *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion: Essays in Honour of Niel Gunson* (Canterbury, NZ: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies and Canberra: Pandanus Books, Australian National University 2005), 155.

²⁸ David Hilliard, 'The God of the Melanesian Mission,' in Herda, Reilly, and Hilliard, eds. *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion*, 195-212.

²⁹ J.T. Field et al (including Brown), 'Notes on Totemism,' *Annual Report, British New Guinea* (1887-8), Appendix C, pp. 14-7; George Brown, 'The Conceptual Theory of the Origins of Totemism,' *Australasian Society for the Advancement of Science* 13 (1912): 401-13.

³⁰ George Brown, 'Papuans and Polynesians,' *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 16 (1887): 311-27; *Melanesians and Polynesians: Their Life-Histories Described and Compared* (London: Macmillan, 1910); *George Brown, D.D.: Pioneer-Missionary and Explorer: An Autobiography: A Narrative of Forty-eight Years Residence in Samoa, New Britain, etc.* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908). I am grateful to Professor Garry Trompf of the University of Sydney for alerting me to the sources in this and the preceding footnote.

Bay of Islands had converted to Christianity.³¹ The Maori believed in the spiritual powers of nature (*atua*), the spiritual authority of individuals within the community (*mana*), the concept of the special sacredness of holy things (*tapu*), and that codes of behaviour (*tikanga*) existed to regulate communities.³² Therefore it was not a huge jump for them to add to this religious cosmology, belief in one God, whom they named Te Atua. Some have even perceived evidence for belief in a supreme deity, Io, in pre-Christian contact Maori belief. According to Michael King, however,

The major points of Christian belief that would contrast with tikanga Maori were the notions that natural man was a fallen creature needing to be redeemed by Christ's suffering and death; and that every human life - whether of rangatira [chief], commoner or slave - was of equal value in the eyes of Te Atua and those who acknowledged Him.³³

In spite of such similarities, the earliest Methodist missionaries to New Zealand seem to have shared the same low view of the indigenous people as their counterparts in Australia. Even as late as 1922 the Rev W.J. Williams in his *Centenary Sketches of New Zealand Methodism* could write, 'Anything more unlovely than the character and disposition of the Natives who at that time lived on [the shores of Whangaroa Harbour] it is impossible for the human mind to picture.'³⁴ Methodist missionaries spoke to a group of thirty or forty Maori from Towranga in July 1825 and asked them how many gods were among them. One of the group whispered to another that he should reply, 'One,' but when asked the name and location of this god, the man demurred. The missionaries then urged the Maori people to follow the example of the Tahitians.

The people of Tahiti, a short time since, were as you are now: they are of a strange language, had tapus among them, and had wooden gods which they worshipped; but, after the Missionaries went among them, they attended to their instructions and believed in the Great God; and He gave them his Holy Spirit, and they split up their wooden gods, and cooked their food by them, and now they have become Missionaries themselves, and teach their countrymen in the neighbouring islands, and build large houses for prayer.³⁵

In Maori mythology, the term *Te Reinga* (from the noun meaning 'a place of leaping') is used to refer both to the place of departed spirits and to the locality of the North

³¹ Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin 2000), 43

³² A fascinating 19th century discussion of *mana* can be found in chapter 15 of Frederick Edward Maning's, *Old New Zealand: Being Incidents of Native Customs and Character in the Old Times by A Pakeha Maori* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1863) available on line at the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre. <http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-ManPake-c15.html> accessed 5 April, 2013. See also Allan K. Davidson, *Aotearoa New Zealand: Defining Moments in the Gospel-Culture Encounter* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996) for a good, though brief, survey of Maori responses to Christianity.

³³ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), 139-40.

³⁴ W.J. Williams, *Centenary Sketches of New Zealand Methodism* (Christchurch, n.d., circa 1922), 12.

³⁵ 'Death of Christian Rhangi, a New-Zealand Chief, who died September 15, 1825, the day after his baptism,' *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* 7:9 (September, 1826), 316. It is unclear whether Rhangi was his given name or whether this was an honorific derived from *rangatira*, the Maori word for 'chief.' The *ariki* was the paramount chief at the head of the tribe. *Rangi* was also the name of a god who along with *Papa* had produced a pantheon of lesser gods. Sinclair, 21-22. Though this account is given in a Primitive Methodist magazine it must be drawing on earlier Wesleyan source material since Primitive Methodism did not arrive in New Zealand until 1844.

Cape the area to which the *wairua* (soul or spirit) travels.³⁶ Methodist missionaries taught that those who did not believe the teachings of the Bible would be ‘the devil’s servants here and...his slaves in the Rainga [sic].’ In conversation with the New Zealand ‘chief,’ Rhangi, the missionaries enquired into the state of the dying man.

Sometimes when sitting alone, I feel my heart gloomy or dark; and think that the God of the White people is not our God, and that the Rainga [sic] is the only place which we have to go to: then my heart feels enlightened, and again becomes gladdened with the thought of going to heaven...I think of the love of Christ, and ask him to wash this bad heart, and take away this native heart and give me a new heart.³⁷

To these particular Methodist missionaries the designation ‘Christian’ was more or less equivalent to ‘European.’ They told Chief Rhangi, ‘The people who believe in Jesus Christ are called by one name after him, which is, Christian. We, who are here now, are called so; that is Europeans: but those who do not believe are call Heathens: the New Zealanders are Heathens...’³⁸ The old chief died on Thursday, 15 September, 1825, but not before confessing faith in Jesus Christ, being baptised on the previous day and entrusting the care of his children to the missionaries. The missionaries regarded his ‘stedfastness [sic]...on the verge of the grave, and his firm resistance of all the Native Superstitions’ as sufficient grounds for baptism. In addition to his Maori name he took the name ‘Christian’ energetically repeating his new name several times during the ceremony. Though he expressed a desire that his body be delivered over to the missionaries, presumably so that it could receive a Christian burial, the local people took the body away in a canoe and would not reveal to the missionaries what burial customs would be observed. There may be a little sour grapes in the missionaries telling the local people that ‘their disposing of the body was of no consequence as to his salvation; for his body was all corruption, but his soul was in heaven.’³⁹

Keith Sinclair, not known for his high regard for religion in New Zealand life, took a dim view of the missionaries’ approach to indigenous beliefs.

It is probable that many aspects of Maori religion have been forgotten by the Maoris and were never accurately written down or even understood by Europeans. Few of the early missionaries, who made a determined onslaught upon heathenism, were concerned to record for posterity what they were so busy destroying.⁴⁰

There were, however, some exceptions to this approach. Wesleyan missionary Thomas Buddle (1812-1883), first principal of the Wesleyan Native Institution established at Grafton in 1845, and editor of the Maori newspaper *Te Haeata* from 1859-1862 gained a considerable wealth of knowledge regarding Maori language, customs, and mythology.⁴¹ Generally speaking however Wesleyans shared with other Protestants of

³⁶ <http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/> accessed 4 April 2013.

³⁷ ‘Death of Christian Rhangi,’ 317.

³⁸ ‘Death of Christian Rhangi,’ 317.

³⁹ The author of the account is not given but those present are named as ‘Messrs. Davies, C. Davis, Fairburn, and myself.’ William Puckey served as interpreter during the baptismal rite. ‘Death of Christian Rhangi,’ 320-21.

⁴⁰ Sinclair, 21-22.

⁴¹ Y. L. Sutherland, ‘Te Reo o te Perehi: Messages to Maori in the Wesleyan Newspaper *Te Haeata* 1859-62,’ MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1999.

the period a sense of European cultural superiority. William Morley, writing in 1900, looked back favourably on the educational ministry of the early missionary work as having enabled missionaries 'to become acquainted with the mental powers and habits of their people...and, by communicating knowledge, sap the foundations of their superstitious practices. Moreover, the facts thus placed before [the Maori] gave them fresh food for thought, directed that thought into healthier channels, and so tended to raise and purify their minds.'⁴² Maori culture was thought of as something to be supplanted by a civilising process that went hand in hand with Christianisation.⁴³ The education of Maori ministers (though they were not considered ministers in their own right, but merely 'assistants') was best carried out, according to Morley, 'away from the demoralising influence of the native kaingas [villages].'⁴⁴ In a context such as this little interest was likely to be expressed toward the religious beliefs of the Indigenous people.

The attitude toward the declining Maori population and culture reflected in W. H. Daniel's *History of Methodism* (1879) is typical of the 'social Darwinist' view of the time. 'The Maoris are a rapidly declining race. Like the aborigines of Tasmania and Australia, they seemed destined to melt away before the Anglo-Saxon.'⁴⁵ One Maori view of the situation was similar: 'The white man's rat has killed the native rat. The fly which came with the Englishman has driven our fly away. The clover which he has sown in our fields is killing the ferns which covered our hills, and the Maori will disappear before the Pakeha [white man].'⁴⁶

Attitudes towards traditional Maori religion are brought into focus by the sectarian rivalry that existed between the churches. Anglicans and Wesleyans frowned on the Catholic missionaries' greater tolerance of polygamy and tattooing. The distribution of crucifixes, medallions and images were seen as pandering to Maori superstition.⁴⁷ The New Zealand Wars raged between 1860 and 1870 as largely Protestant settlers appropriating large tracts of traditional Maori lands met fierce resistance from a people with a proud warrior culture.⁴⁸

During this time many Maori converts renounced the Christian faith. Susan J. Thompson states that 'of all the churches involved in Maori work, Methodism suffered most damage as a result of the wars' with fighting beginning in Taranaki 'a Wesleyan stronghold' and the spread of hostilities to the Waikoto and King Country seeing Wesleyan missionary personnel withdraw from those areas. When missionaries

⁴² William Morley, *The History of Methodism in New Zealand* (Wellington, McKee and Co, 1900), 109.

⁴³ James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: Allan Lane, 1996), 124-127. For a good discussion of missionaries in New Zealand see Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), chapter 10, 'God and Guns,' pp. 131-50. For other valuable insights into settler-Maori relations see Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2000) especially 'Part One: Maori and Settlers, 1642-1870.'

⁴⁴ Morley, *History of Methodism in New Zealand*, 47.

⁴⁵ W. H. Daniels, *The Illustrated History of Methodism in Great Britain, America, and Australia* (Sydney and Melbourne: George Coffey, 1879), 792.

⁴⁶ Daniels, 792.

⁴⁷ Sinclair, 43.

⁴⁸ Once called the 'Maori Wars' it is now recognised that this one-sided designation places blame on only one party to the conflict. Wars are always conducted between two opposing sides. Similarly, the 'Boer War' is now usually referred to as 'The South African War.'

sided with settlers during the conflict many Maori defected and returned to their traditional beliefs, leaving Wesleyan churches seriously depleted by the 1870s.⁴⁹ Some adopted a new hybrid religion of their own, blending elements of traditional Maori religion with Jewish and Christian customs.⁵⁰ After the New Zealand Wars the importance of strengthening the autonomy of Maori culture and language became of central importance, leaving the paternalistic views of some Wesleyans to appear all the more archaic.

IV. The Wesleyan Chinese Mission

It was not only in exotic locations such as the Pacific Islands that nineteenth century Methodists came into contact with religious beliefs quite different from their own. The large Chinese population on the New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian gold fields brought them into contact with Chinese folk religion ('Shenism'). The discovery of gold in 1851 led to increased prosperity (especially in Melbourne and the development of surrounding boom towns such as Bendigo and Ballarat). It also led to racially motivated violence against the Chinese and an intensification of republican sentiment. The three themes of prosperity, racism, and republicanism tend to intersect in historical writing on this period.

Church leaders took different approaches to the newfound prosperity – some rebuking the greed and exploitation of the gold fields, and others seeing it as a sign of Australia's manifest destiny. Radical republicans saw the discovery of gold as containing 'the elements of all the future greatness – the elements of future nationality, and of coming independence... Yes! We shall be a nation; not a dependency of a far off country... [Our] country must ere long become what God and nature designed it should be – 'First flower of the earth, first gem of the sea.'⁵¹ The Reverend John Dunmore Lang, founding minister of Sydney's Scots Presbyterian Church (he remained there from 1826 until his death in 1878), made a tour of the NSW goldfields in 1851, when 'the mania for the diggings was at its height.'⁵² He told the diggers on the Turon River that God had promised 'a brilliant and glorious future for Australia... He who sits in the heavens and laughs at the impotent combinations of unprincipled men' had directed the country to an extensive natural resource, which would lead to the day when New South Wales would no longer be a despised colony, but a young nation, 'Australia' (the Southern land) on equal terms with England. In Manning Clark's reading this expressed the belief that the bush barbarians would finally be civilized.⁵³

⁴⁹ Susan J. Thompon, *Knowledge and Vital Piety: Education for Methodist Ministry in New Zealand from the 1840s* (Auckland: Wesley Historical Society, 2012), 35. Maori attendance in Wesleyan churches dropped steeply from 7,590 in 1855 to 2,434 in 1874. The number of Maori chapels also declined during the same period. Eric W. Hames, *Out of the Common Way, The European Church in the Colonial Era 1840-1913* Published as vol. 27 nos. 3 and 4, 1972, of the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society of New Zealand to mark the 150th Anniversary of New Zealand Methodism (Auckland, 1972), 51-52.

⁵⁰ King, *Penguin History of New Zealand*, 147-48.

⁵¹ *The People's Advocate* (9 August 1851).

⁵² Iain H. Murray, *Australian Christian Life from 1788: An Introduction and an Anthology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 125.

⁵³ Michael Cathcart, *Manning Clark's History of Australia Abridged* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 231.

This vision of a glorious future for Australia did not, however, include ‘the Chinaman.’ By 1854 there were 4,000 Chinese on the Australian goldfields. In 1857, 11,000 more travelled overland to the Victorian goldfields, swelling their total numbers there to 23,623 and the total number in the colony to 25,424. An estimated 30,000 at the time of the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia were excluded from citizenship through the infamous ‘White Australia’ policy enshrined in the Immigration Restrictions Act of 1901.⁵⁴ Henry Parkes, in July 1854 argued in the Legislative Council that there was a need to prevent the ‘degrading influence’ of so many ‘Orientals’ on the Australian race. Some, such as the Catholic social reformer Caroline Chisolm, argued for the equality of the races, but most agreed on the need to place strict limitations on Chinese immigration and other members of the ‘servile races.’ The ‘working man’s paradise’ could not be threatened by the debilitating effects of racial impurity. At Lambing Flat (NSW) in 1861, the Eureka flag was rolled out, to the chant of ‘No Chinese! Roll up! Roll up!’ They lustily sang, ‘Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves! No more Chinamen will enter New South Wales!’ As the band played *Rule Britannia* and *Le Marseillaise* the men moved into the Chinese area, cutting off as many pigtaileds as they could, striking the Chinese with spades, whipping them with stockwhips, bludgeoning them with clubs, and burning their belongings in a great bonfire.⁵⁵

The Wesleyan Mission to the Chinese on the Victorian gold fields needs to be placed in this heavily racialised context.⁵⁶ It is hardly to be expected that any sympathetic portrait of Chinese culture or religion should emerge out of such a setting. In 1872 Leong On Tong became the first Chinese person admitted on trial to the Wesleyan ministry.⁵⁷ He was later received fully into the ranks of the ordained ministry in 1876. His handwritten diary (1870-1873) reveals some insights into Wesleyan responses to Chinese religion on the Victorian goldfields.⁵⁸ This source is particularly interesting because it provides the perspective of a Chinese Christian toward traditional Chinese religion. Leong On Tong travelled widely, initially as a Catechist, through the areas of Castlemaine, Sandhurst (Bendigo) and Golden Square. Eventually he became Superintendent of the Chinese Mission in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne, and returned to China in 1885 at which time there were eight Chinese Methodist congregations in Victoria. Chinese catechists employed by the Wesleyans had some

⁵⁴ For an examination of the global dimensions of racially based immigration policies see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁵ Drawn from Manning Clark.

⁵⁶ Ian Breward, ‘The Wesleyan Mission to the Chinese in Victoria up to 1902,’ in Geoffrey Treloar and Robert Linder, eds. *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission: In Honour of Stuart Piggin, Master of Robert Menzies College, 1990-2004* (Sydney: Robert Menzies College, 2004). For a broader survey see Walter Phillips, ‘Seeking Souls in the Diggings: Christian Missions to the Chinese on the Victorian Goldfields,’ *Victorian Historical Journal*, 72: 1 and 2 (Sept. 2001): 86-104.

⁵⁷ Also referred to as Laong Oun Hung. See Benjamin Penny, ‘Taking Away Joss: Chinese Religion and the Wesleyan Mission in Castlemaine, 1868,’ *Humanities Research* 12:1 (2005): 107-117.

⁵⁸ The Diary of Leong On Tong is 242 pages long and handwritten in English. The original is held in the Sugden Collection at Queen’s College, Melbourne. The page numbers used here are those of the typed transcription of the journal by Arthur Huck of the Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne held in the Queen’s College library.

degree of success gathering 'small congregations of lonely men, some of who were baptised.'⁵⁹ By 1925 the number of Chinese Wesleyans was said to be 'dwindling.'⁶⁰

It is clear from Leong On Tong's diary that Wesleyans applied a zero tolerance policy to Chinese folk religion on the Victorian goldfields. Any convert must make an immediate break with all participation in the rituals of the Joss House. His Diary shows that he consistently opposed opium smoking among the Chinese and that he had an implacable opposition to the 'idol worship' associated with the Joss House.⁶¹ The word 'joss' is a corruption of the Portuguese word *deus* meaning 'gods.' Joss Houses were sites for the worship of various deities in Chinese folk religion (Shenism). Incense and candles were burned before the deity, whose image was portrayed on paper, in exchange for good fortune. To Leong On Tong such practice breached the second and third commandments, was a waste of money which poor miners could ill afford, and brought no actual benefit since 'idols' were dumb and lifeless. He frequently argued with Joss House keepers that the worship of images was 'against' God and urged at least one to seek another mode of employment.⁶² In 1871 he rebuked a Chinese man who had begun to attend church but had 'put up an idol in his house.' 'I told him that it was wrong to do so, as he has already heard about the true Doctrine.'⁶³ 'Some of my countrymen,' he wrote in October 1871, 'said that they were in want of water very much. And they wished that the idols would give them some rain. So I told them it was not the idols who gives [sic] rain, but the Almighty who is in heaven.'⁶⁴

The word 'heathen' did not have quite the same negative connotation in the nineteenth century that it now carries. Essentially it meant at best 'non-Christian' or at worst 'uncivilized.' Leon On Tong consistently refers to his own people who had not yet converted to Christianity as 'heathens.'⁶⁵ One convert was said to have given up his 'heathen bad ways.'⁶⁶ This kind of language was part of the process of enculturation for Chinese converts who had been taught to view the religious beliefs of their countrymen in a very negative light. At Chewton he told the residents of one house that they were wrong to buy candles, incense sticks and gold and silver papers for offering to their dead relatives, images of whom they had set up to worship. Told that this was a waste of money because idols had no power to take care of them, they 'were very displeased and said...ah we are Chinese and must worship the idols...because we look upon the idols to take care of us.' He pointed them instead to 'the everlasting God.'⁶⁷ After preaching at Penny Weight Flat one Chinese person confided that he never worshipped idols when any English people were looking because they laughed at him and said he was foolish to 'worship such useless things.

⁵⁹ Ian Breward, *A History of the Churches in Australasia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 176-77.

⁶⁰ 'The Chinese Mission,' *Jubilee Souvenir of the Methodist Home Missions of Victoria, 1875 to 1925* (Melbourne: Spectator Publishing Co., 1925), 31.

⁶¹ Leong On Tong rebuked opium smokers at Penny Weight Flat on 9 May 1870 and at Little Bendigo on 29 May 1870 as well as in many other places. Diary, 9-10, 12-13. Penny, 'Taking Away Joss,' 107-117.

⁶² Leon On Tong, Diary, 6, 47, 77-78.

⁶³ Leon On Tong, Diary, 22 - 23

⁶⁴ Leon On Tong, Diary, 28 October 1871, 24.

⁶⁵ Leon On Tong, Diary, 46, 65, 73.

⁶⁶ Leon On Tong, Diary, 50.

⁶⁷ Leon On Tong, Diary, 53.

And so I feel quite ashamed. Leong told him it was wrong to do so whether or not English people were watching.⁶⁸ A gardener at Eaglehawk grew nervous when Leong spoke against idols afraid that such talk would offend 'the idol painted on paper' asking if they could go outside and speak. Leong urged him instead to fear God.⁶⁹

The missionary even applied fear tactics to his 'countrymen' at Spring Gully when he told them of a Chinese man at Vaughan who had burned his house down by 'giving thanks to the Joss burning candles and papers and firing crackers' on Chinese New Year and that this 'unluck' had been God's way of punishing him.⁷⁰ Wesleyan catechists resisted any syncretism between the Chinese and Christian religions. At Kangaroo Flat a man who worshipped images said he must 'follow a little English religion and also follow the Chinese religion as well,' but Leong would have none of that.⁷¹ At Yandiot one man stated, 'I am pleased with what you have told me except the giving up of worshipping our dead ancestors I don't think I can give it up so quick.'⁷² But sudden repentance was the Methodist way, and there was little patience with attempts to straddle both worlds.

In 1873 Leon On Tong helped relocate a 'little house of worship from Moon Light Flat to our Chinese Church yard which was formerly a Chinese Joss house and now the Christians are putting [sic] it out in the Church yard.'⁷³ This may have been the building over which he had been involved in a legal dispute in 1868 when a previous owner who, perhaps not having anticipated this use of the property, claimed that he had leased rather than sold the property and was now seeking financial compensation.

Monday July 20, was the day appointed for its removal, and I, accompanied by nine of my countrymen, went, with two horses and drays, to Five Flags, and, as I expected great opposition from the Pagans living in that neighbourhood, I asked the Revs. E. King and C. Dubourg to be present on the occasion. We also secured the presence of a policeman. During the time the house was being taken down there were great excitement and angry threats, but the presence of the ministers and the policemen happily prevented a breach of the peace. The rain came down very fast; and Mr Dubourg for about two hours held joss under his arm. My county men expected every moment to see him fall down dead, or some judgement to come upon him.⁷⁴

In 1925, the Jubilee Souvenir reports of the Methodist Home Missions of Victoria devoted a single paragraph to the Chinese Mission under the heading 'Immigration.' Originally begun as a ministry of the Foreign Mission Society the Chinese mission had by this time come under the auspices of Home Missions. Mr T. Fay Loie, described as 'Minister of our Chinese church,' also gave a brief two-sentence report. 'A little-known but remarkable work has gone on here for over 50 years. Souls have been won, children and adults educated, and the knowledge of the one True and

⁶⁸ Diary, 55.

⁶⁹ Diary, 61 - 62.

⁷⁰ Diary, 79-80.

⁷¹ Diary, 81.

⁷² Diary, 95.

⁷³ Diary, 73.

⁷⁴ Leon On Tong's account is presented by Rev. E. King in 'Chinese Mission in Castlemaine – a Joss House Transformed into a House of Christian Worship,' *The Wesleyan Chronicle* (20 Oct.1868): 149, cited in Penny, 108.

Living God made known to this interesting, faithful and grateful people.’⁷⁵ Loie was the only evangelist working among the Chinese by that time.⁷⁶

V. Conclusions

Comparative studies of differing settings can sometimes yield valuable insights into Methodist missionary history.⁷⁷ What was different about the various sites of Methodist missionary encounter and what factors remained constant? In each of the three settings investigated here, a very negative view of traditional religious beliefs was exhibited by Methodist missionaries. The Australian Aborigine was thought to have had no religion at all but to have the potential to be raised from a primitive state through the civilising influences of the Gospel. The Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand were thought to have a more complex set of beliefs even if this perception was flawed, since Aborigines had just as sophisticated a set of beliefs. With some notable exceptions it was thought best to keep Maori converts away from the debilitating effects of their traditional religious culture. Chinese folk religion was considered by Anglophone Methodist ministers and Chinese catechists alike to be heathenish and idolatrous; a clean break must be made from every aspect of the devotion offered in the Joss House.

This attitude of rejection is quiet understandable given the conviction of nineteenth century Methodists that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the only hope for the pagan world. Even if their work must inevitably be seen as part of a colonising process, they did not engage in the civilizing project for its own sake. Believing that people were lost without Christ they tried to bring them the good news of salvation. Largely they acted out of love and compassion, and this may be said without denying the detrimental affect that missionary work often had on Indigenous cultures. The role of missionaries in Australasia and the Pacific, as elsewhere, has been presented in both positive and negative ways. They have been seen either as perpetrators of cultural genocide or as benevolent and enlightened humanitarians. Though examples of both types of missionary may be found, the truth is found somewhere in between these extremes.⁷⁸ Richard Broome has pointed out that from the time of European settlement Christianity itself needs to be seen as an Aboriginal religion, so enthusiastically was it embraced by Indigenous people. Of course this does not mean that the Church was not involved in injustice toward the Aborigines or that Christians, including Methodists, did not at times share racist attitudes that could be found in the wider community. Many missionaries had a paternalistic view of Aborigines as ‘children’ of a ‘degraded and depraved race’,⁷⁹ and as ‘the ultimate example of Ham’s curse.’⁸⁰ At the same time more humanitarian missionary efforts were respected by Indigenous people who often admired the missionaries’ ‘raw courage’ and who benefited from the application of European medicines to treat endemic health problems.⁸¹ Henry Reynolds, writing about the Australian colonies in the 1830s and

⁷⁵ ‘The Chinese Mission,’ 32.

⁷⁶ ‘The Chinese Mission,’ 31.

⁷⁷ For one such study see S.G.G. Ritchie’s “[T]he Sound of the Bell Amidst the Wilds”: Evangelical Perceptions of Northern Aotearoa/New Zealand Māori and the Aboriginal Peoples of Port Phillip, Australia, c.1820s-1840s,’ MA thesis, Victoria University, Wellington, 2009.

⁷⁸ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians* (Sydney: Allan and Unwin, 2001), 108.

⁷⁹ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians* (Sydney: Allan and Unwin, 2001), 108.

⁸⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 31.

⁸¹ Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, 105-107.

40s reminds us that it was often missionaries and clergy who spoke up for Aboriginal welfare 'when so many fellow colonists looked on with indifference or were keen to see the indigenous people and their legal rights trodden under foot in the onrush of colonial progress.'⁸² They 'may not have changed many minds, significantly altered colonial behaviour or moderated the violence out on the vast frontiers but they clearly troubled many consciences and raised questions which didn't easily go away.'⁸³

It also does a disservice to the peoples of the Southern World to portray them merely as passive victims of cultural genocide as though they had no self-determination. Rather, they often actively and creatively negotiated the new situation that presented itself to them in order to ensure their ongoing survival and flourishing. Embracing Christianity and creating unique expressions of the faith in terms of their own traditional culture was one such strategy. 'Schooling and Christianity, though shaped by European notions, produced literate Aborigines who petitioned Parliament for their rights and believed they were the equal of whites in the eyes of God and destined too for Heaven.'⁸⁴

A more positive view of traditional religious beliefs is discernable in a second stage of missionary encounter with Indigenous Australians and New Zealanders in the twentieth century. This greater openness toward traditional cultures occurred partly because of the need for settler societies and the traditional custodians of the land to arrive at an understanding of their shared past in order to move toward national reconciliation. The situation was different for Chinese immigrants who did not have the same status as the 'First Australians' or the earliest inhabitants of New Zealand. Many were forced to return to China as a result of the Immigration Restriction Bill of 1901 and those few who remained integrated closely into broader society. Chinese folk religion has not been integrated into Chinese-Australian religious identity in the way that traditional Aboriginal beliefs have been. The 'lively interest' and 'joy' expressed by Methodists in 1820 at the prospect of a successful mission to the Aborigines and Pacific Islanders did not anticipate that a positive view of the traditional religious beliefs of the 'heathen' might be gained. Further studies may shed light on the degree to which a more culturally sensitive approach emerged in the succeeding century.

⁸² Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (St. Leonards NSW: Allan and Unwin, 1998), 22.

⁸³ Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, 13.

⁸⁴ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 127.