PART I:
INTRODUCTION
Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands
INTRODUCTION

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In recent years religion has received a good deal of attention in the discourse on globalization. Christianity, in particular, at least in its Pentecostal-charismatic, evangelical and fundamentalist forms, seems to have thrived in the globalizing climate. This has led to a flood of new literature focusing on the spread and growth of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity worldwide. Most authors link these new developments to the ongoing modernization processes that have led to the present capitalist world-system. These processes are commonly described by means of the catchword ‘globalization’ (Lockwood 2004; McGrath 2002; Martin 2002, 1990; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Shaull and Cesar 2000; Poewe and Hexham 1997; Cox 1995; Beyer 2000). It should be noted here, however, that in this context not much attention has been paid to the rapid growth of what I call ‘marginal Protestant’ groups, which are usually labelled by the majority of Christians as ‘sects’ or ‘cults’. In this category the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Seventh-day Adventists are also, along with the Pentecostal-charismatic and evangelical-fundamentalist groups, amongst the fastest growing denominations in the world.

The development of Christianity through the centuries has always been very dynamic. In fact, Christianity must itself be seen as a major globalizing force since its beginnings two thousand years ago. From the early days until present times there has been a constant growth in the number of Christians, associated with an expansion of Christianity all over the globe. This dynamic and expansive growth has been accompanied by an increasing diversity and fragmentation into thousands of denominations and groups (Ernst 1994: 3). In this process religion has always been global. As Mark Juergensmeyer observes in his introduction to Global Religions, religious communities and traditions have always maintained permeable boundaries. They have moved, shifted and interacted with one another around the globe. If one thinks of religion as the cultural expression of people’s sense of ultimate significance, it is understandable that these cultural elements would move as people have moved, and that they would change over time just as people have (Juergensmeyer 2003:5).

Some time in the 1970s the demographic centre of Christianity shifted. Since then, the majority of the world’s two billion Christians (32 per cent of the world’s population) have no longer been found in old Europe and North America but in Asia, Oceania, Africa, and Latin America. Both the spiritual and intellectual centre of Christianity is moving to the southern world. Also, predictions are that in two or three decades from now Western Christianity will increasingly have a Pentecostal and charismatic flavour. Not only Euro-American Christians but also the ‘mainline’ churches that they established in earlier centuries will find themselves on the margin of Global Christendom, says Harvey Cox (2003:18).
The South Pacific region can be seen to some extent as a microcosm, where one can encounter all the worldwide tendencies and changes in religious affiliation as described briefly above. To what extent the Christian leaders and thinkers of the Pacific Islands region are equipped to address this globalized context needs to be asked and answered.

As will be clearly shown in the detailed country case studies from the Pacific Islands, there is clear evidence that Pentecostal-charismatic, evangelical-fundamentalist and marginal Protestant groups have experienced rapid growth in this region, as they have worldwide. This has led to an ongoing re-shaping of the religious landscape in the different Pacific Islands nations. The changes in religious affiliation have also led to an unprecedented diversity of Christian denominations in the region.

The cause of the growth in the number of adherents of a steadily growing number of movements and churches alongside the established historic mainline churches is multifaceted. One clear correlation that may be seen is between the rise of these newer groups and the occurrence of a fundamental transformation in Pacific Islands societies and cultures. Rapid changes in society, for example, were caused by World War II, which suddenly made available an abundance of goods for the army, modern technology, and new ideas of equality and self-determination. Later there was the economic boom of the 1960s and the forced implementation of the western capitalist system from the 1960s to the present, with rapid urbanization and a massive displacement of people. All this contributed to fundamental social changes that have affected many citizens of the Pacific Islands: cultural values that were not compatible with those of the Western world are disappearing; a cash and wages system is replacing the subsistence and barter system; traditional social and political structures are increasingly collapsing and social mobilization and urbanization are breaking up families, clans, and villages; the decay of traditional social control has permitted an increase in criminality, alcoholism, domestic violence, etc. These social changes have impinged on many people in such a way that they feel uprooted from their traditions and are confused about their future. People suffer from the anonymity of the towns and long for a community to which they can belong. The resulting search for a new social community often ends in one of the Pentecostal-charismatic, neo-charismatic, evangelical-fundamentalist or other religious groups. People in need of clarity and orientation find personal answers in the simple doctrines, conservative interpretation of the Bible, and clear ethical principles taught by the growing religious groups.

It is safe to say that in any assembly, synod or annual general meeting of the historic mainline churches in the Pacific Islands in recent years, concerns have repeatedly been aired in one way or another regarding the major shifts that have occurred in religious affiliation and the impact of these changes on individuals, communities and society at large. There is now no island nation that has not registered many new Christian denominations or religious groups in the past twenty years, either as breakaway groups from existing churches or more often as a result of missionary/evangelistic activities that usually sprang from the USA, Australia, New Zealand or Europe. This has led to an unprecedented number of different and usually competing religious bodies in each island nation. Just fifty years ago the religious landscape in the islands was almost always characterized by the absolute dominance of the historic mainline churches established by the first missionaries 150 or 200 years ago, namely the Methodists, Congregationalists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics and a few others. It used to be the norm for a village to have only one church, or sometimes two (a Protestant and a Catholic), with these churches joined in a very few cases by the odd Mormon, Seventh-
day Adventist, Baptist, or Assemblies of God church. Today it is quite common for
people even of villages in remote areas with populations of fewer than 500 souls to be
divided along denominational lines, with one or the other of the historic mainline churches
coexisting with a variety of newer arrivals. There is clear evidence that the establishment
and growth of new churches takes place at the expense of one or other of the Protestant
historic mainline churches.

The research presented in this book, carried out over the past four years in 14 island
countries of the region, is an attempt to give an accurate account of changes in religious affil-
iation in the Pacific Islands since World War II, especially during the past 30 years. It examines
the reasons for the ongoing re-shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands and provides
background information about the variety of newer religious groups, denominations and
para-church organizations. In order to make sense of all this, it looks at the extent to which
globalization processes may have contributed to the rapid growth and proliferation of a
variety of Pentecostal-charismatic-evangelical-fundamentalist and other new religious groups
in the region. Secondly, it explores why people convert to these 'new' groups and in so
doing discard their traditional networks and practices. Last but not least, the socio-cultural,
socio-economic and social-political implications of the ongoing changes are investigated.

The research project that led to this publication was guided by the following aims:

1. To present a comprehensive picture of the state of religion in the Pacific Islands at the
beginning of the 21st century.

2. To update and revise the statistical data previously compiled and published in six case
studies (Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia, Fiji and the Solomon Islands) in Winds of
Change (Ernst 1994).

3. To carry out a new study by attempting a substantial extension of the scope and depth
of the work by including more island nations.

4. To analyse the re-shaping of the religious landscape in the Pacific Islands by considering
the impact of modernization processes, commonly summarized under the term
globalization, on individuals and societies in the Pacific Islands.

5. To publish the results in English and French, and later perhaps to publish the individual
country case studies in local languages, subject to the approval and support of the
respective local churches.

6. To contribute to the worldwide discourse on the relationship between changes in
religious affiliation and globalization, by means of a thorough and theoretically guided
empirical study from the Pacific Islands region.

The different authors of this book represent a variety of academic disciplines, experiences
and denominations. From 13 to 21 May 2002 a preparatory meeting of the research group
was held at the Pacific Theological College, at which a common approach for the conducting
of field research (regarding methodology, terminology, and a structure for reporting) was
cooperatively developed. The research methods used consist, basically, of enquiries of three
types: hundreds of in-depth interviews on the basis of the interview guidelines developed
jointly by the research group in 2002, active and passive observation and participation, and
analysis of a wide variety of published materials (church documents, other primary and
secondary sources, pamphlets, leaflets, etc.). Most of the interviews have been transcribed;
the original tapes as well as the transcripts, documents and other materials accumulated
over the past four years will be made available at the library of the Pacific Theological
College for future use by students, scholars and the interested public.
The book is divided into three main parts: Part I contains the analytical framework used, starting with an overview of the roots, trends and development of new forms and expressions of Christianity, with a focus on the past 200–300 years. Definitions of central terms are provided in an introduction to the roots and development of the Pentecostal movement, the charismatic and neo-charismatic movement, the evangelical movement, and Christian fundamentalism.

The second section of Part I is an introduction to globalization. With reference to the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, Fernand Braudel and Karl Marx, globalization is understood as a historical process that began 500 years ago and led to the formation of the current capitalist world-system. The different manifestations of globalization in our world today have triggered off much discussion of the positive and negative aspects of globalization, which are presented together with a discussion of alternatives to globalization. The latter provides a basic framework for possible economic and political structural reforms of the current system.

The last section of Part I orients the reader to the Pacific Islands region and its sub-regions, highlighting their social, cultural, and ethnic diversity. The historical roots of globalization processes are traced from the time of the first contacts between Europeans and Pacific Islanders, to the subsequent period of colonial imperialism, the effects of World War II, and decolonization. How these have contributed to the shaping of the region and its nations and populations today is discussed by looking at different, sometimes contradictory, aspects: on the positive side, a growing regional integration and cooperation, and a general betterment of living conditions (life expectancy, education, economic development); and on the negative side, an increasing disintegration of social structures and the consequences of this for individuals and societies (widespread poverty, economic exploitation and environmental destruction).

Part I provides the background for Part II, which consists of 14 detailed island nation case studies: of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia in Melanesia; Fiji, which is between Melanesia and Polynesia; the Polynesian island nations of Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Tuvalu, and French Polynesia; and the Micronesian states of Kiribati, Pohnpei, and Marshall Islands. Except for Fiji, no Pacific Island nation has a sizeable number of followers of other world religions. For that reason a case study of non-Christian religions in Fiji (Hinduism, Islam, Bahá'í) is included, with the aim of answering the question whether during the last three decades — in the context of globalization — there have been developments in the non-Christian religions of Fiji that resemble the changes in Christianity in Fiji.

The case studies differ in length and style due to the variety of backgrounds of the different writers. It goes without saying that Papua New Guinea requires more space than Niue or Tuvalu. All case studies follow the same main outline, with a general introduction to the history, land and people, economies, education, health, political structures, and recent socioeconomic-political developments. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the religious landscape in each context, with an individual introduction of each denomination or religious group, the presentation, comparison and analysis of statistical information, and a brief survey of religious co-operation or non-co-operation. Most of the information on the different denominations, religious groups and para-church organizations is based on extensive field research, with hundreds of interviews carried out, transcribed and analyzed, which allows us to present the state of Christianity in the Pacific Islands at the beginning of the 21st century in a form that is unique and not available anywhere else in the world.
The analysis of the wealth of information provided forms the final section of the book, Part III. Going beyond a mere description of what is labelled 'The Re-shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands', answers are offered to the questions that sparked off the research project, namely: What is the relationship (if any) between globalization and changes in religious affiliation? Why do people join new religious groups and bear the consequences of sometimes breaking away from families, relatives, communities, and traditional ways of life, thereby causing pain and conflict? Why are the historic mainline churches in a long term state of decline and apparently unable to re-adjust their structures, programmes and activities to the challenges of a rapidly changing social environment? What are the implications on economics, politics and culture if more and more people join new religious groups and so form a conservative social movement, which in some islands already displays features of the New Religious Right or the so-called Moral Majority in the USA? Finally, the research has tried to develop for the historic mainline churches an outline of how they could respond to the manifold challenges of globalization. In this context the possibilities for a new visionary model of being church are explored, with reference to the rediscovery and reformulation of ecumenical co-operation in all areas of work and a firm move towards a theology (in both theory and practice) that places the marginalized, disadvantaged, oppressed and poor in the centre.

The different sections of the book try to present all information in forms that can be understood by our main target group, the people in the Pacific Islands. Most Pacific Islanders have in common a keen interest in spiritual and religious life, as it is everywhere closely interwoven into the social fabric. This attempt is facilitated by a large apparatus of explanatory information in the glossary, graphs, background information in boxes, explanations of abbreviations, index, bibliography, and, last but not least, the photos that illustrate Pacific Islands life between the modern and traditional, urban and rural, new churches and forms of worship versus traditional church structures and forms of worship. In other words, while reducing as much as possible the academic language usually necessary for this kind of publication, in order to make the book accessible to a readership beyond the classrooms of theological schools and universities, we aim at the same time to fulfil all the requirements for an academic publication that will make the results of our research accessible to scrutiny by the wider world beyond the Pacific Islands region.

References


