

Short Summary

Navigating Troubled Waters:

The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands since the 1980s

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Chapter 3: Taurira, Marama Gaston: Ecumenism in French Polynesia: A *Maohi* Understanding that Springs from the *Fenua*

The islands known today as French Polynesia lie in the South Pacific Ocean halfway between Australia and California. The five island groups contain 118 predominantly small islands, whose surface of 1,042 square kilometres covers only roughly 0,1% of the total sea area. Except for a few islands, climate has blessed French Polynesia with rich soils and luxuriant vegetation.

Despite of arguments about the geographic origins of the very first Pacific Islanders, it is commonly agreed that the first people to settle in French Polynesia arrived at about 300 CE, which is relatively late in comparison with certain Melanesian regions. Nevertheless, the first in-depth encounters between Pacific Islanders and Europeans took place in Eastern Polynesia, beginning with the arrival of Captain Samuel Wallis in 1767. The Englishman was closely followed by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in 1768 who started the era of French influence in the Pacific that lasts until today. Further cultural “exchange” with Europe via Captain James Cook finally resulted in a remarkable cultural shift even before the first Missionaries arrived in Tahiti, French Polynesia’s biggest island, in 1797.

The French Protectorate of Tahiti and Moorea was established in 1842. Despite of lasting dependence on France, French Polynesia possesses semi-autonomous ruling power, and the question of independency is fiercely fought over by the two main political parties. The population is largely indigenous (70%), but supplemented by 15% Europeans (mainly French), 10% Chinese (who contribute an indispensable part to the region’s economy) and other very small minorities. Influence of the church on politics is limited to the *Maohi* Protestant Church’s decision that no deacon should also hold a high political office at the same time. This decision, however, has influenced the church to a wider extend than it has

influenced politics since it has resulted in a remarkable leadership drain from church offices. Nevertheless, it has ultimately helped the church maintain stability and does not depict a serious problem anymore today.

French Polynesia's economy mainly resides on tourism, which flourishes since the opening of an International Airport in Tahiti in 1962. The economy has also been lifted up by the 193 nuclear tests that were conducted in French Polynesia over a time span of 30 years, until they were stopped at the end of the last century. Far more importantly, however, is the fact that these tests have led to strong health concerns among the local people, respectively actual radioactive contamination of vast parts in the region.

Even though French Polynesia exports some agricultural goods, an enormous trade deficit remains, and living costs are much higher than in other pacific regions due to the huge amount of food imports.

French Polynesia has a general and public funded school system with all branches of education, even though the chapter does not indicate how it would have to be evaluated in comparison to other pacific regions. The chapter highlights the fact that the church schools provide their students with theological education.

The chapter also gives an overview of religious groups. The two main denominations are Protestants and Roman Catholics, each of them constituting around 38% by dominating strongly on some islands but simultaneously being a minority on others. The Mormon Church makes up a minority of 6,5%, whereas the Mormon Reformed Church constitutes 3.6%. Neither the major denominations nor the many smaller groups have made "attempts (...) to open up any ecumenical dialogue" until the formation of the first ecumenical association, the *Tenete* (The Beginning) which still exists today, in 1975.

Despite of fairly clear personal definitions of ecumenism by leaders of the Protestant Church, who see ecumenism as a common work and movement that strives mainly for "peace (...) and justice", the meaning of ecumenism at grassroots level remains quite unknown. Here, the chapter states a "gap between the leadership and the grassroots concerning ecumenism". But nevertheless, this limited understanding of ecumenism as a term does not mean that ecumenical ideas are not lived throughout the French Polynesian islands. Quite contrarily, the chapter points out that for reasons of independency and proximity, a strong movement of cooperation and support between different denominations has evolved within the Tuamotu Archipelago. The exemplariness of this cooperation, not only in terms of shared worship, but especially in terms of support for each other in daily life's struggle, is clearly emphasized by the author. He also generally states that many of the other ecumenical initiatives in French Polynesia aim at supporting common people in their "times of struggle". Several ecumenical bodies by which a wide range of social issues is being addressed are named, and the chapter emphasizes the efforts of French Polynesian Churches to strengthen the theological education in their schools once again. Especially highlighted are also the events of the bicentenary ecumenical celebration of the first LMS missionaries in Tahiti in 1997. This event evolved to not only a celebration for Protestants, but for all *Maohi* Christians. The author considers it to have been a "visible sign of

ecumenism at work”, a “new Pentecost gathering”. Here, the strong participation of Christians despite their apparently limited understanding of the term is shown most forcefully. Yet on the other side, the chapter also points out that the endurance of “remain[ing] taboo[s]” could become a genuine obstacle to ecumenism if the dialogue about them were to be opened.

Apart from ecumenical initiatives in French Polynesia, the *Maohi* Protestant Church in particular is involved in several ecumenical institutions on global, regional and national (e.g. French) level. This can be ascribed to the strong bond with the ecumenical LMS, the strong identification with the ocean that has led to a historical consciousness as inter-pacific travellers and ambassadors, and the awareness for the possible profits that can be gained through ecumenical engagement and cooperation. The chapter does not provide information on the institutional ecumenical involvement of other churches.

In his analysis of field research for this project, the author reveals four core themes.

First, he points out that there is a need to understand the term “ecumenism”, “particularly among youth and women”. Information and decisions remain reserved for a small elite of educated leaders but should be made accessible to the broader range of the public in order to develop better understanding and wider influence on people’s lives.

Second, the chapter points out that ecumenical interaction and cooperation in French Polynesia appears to work best at grassroots level. This atmosphere could develop due to the islands’ small sizes and comparatively great independence from the main churches and other institutions.

Third, interview partners agree that the two main churches (Protestant and Catholic) are the driving forces behind mutual approaches on social issues and thus “crucial to the [...] ecumenical development in the future”.

And fourth, there is support for a national council of churches, especially in the Protestant Church. But because of French laws demanding a strong secularisation, which in some ways contradicts the idea of a national council of churches that would raise a strong voice on social issues, and because of disagreements between the French Polynesian churches on the extent of political activity, the process of the formation of such an institution is inhibited.

Regarding issues and challenges for ecumenism, the chapter mainly focuses on social issues.

The critical economic situation of many *Maohi* is to be emphasized here in particular:

Despite general agreement about the need for action against these troubling economic situations, there is disagreement on the appropriate measures to approach this issue. Yet at the same time, there are further reaching consequences of this poverty that would demand a fast and effective improvement. These consequences include not only negative implementations on church financing, but more importantly also increasing pressure within families that leads to a wide-spread increase of family instability and violence.

Furthermore, HIV – AIDS has developed to a very serious problem in French Polynesia. With more and more people being affected, greater awareness has been and is tried to be created, but limited financial capacities inhibit the campaigns. Additionally, this problem

effects the youth in French Polynesia disproportionately, adding another issue to the already existing question on how to get youths involved more broadly. Still, due to a “spiritual strength” and greater denominational impartiality, the author of the chapter holds an optimistic view on youth’s future regarding their ecumenical involvement.

The chapter also considers climate change one of the most urgent matters facing all of the Pacific churches, small atolls – such as the Tuamotus in French Polynesia – in particular. The chapter calls on church leaders to mutually find solutions for these upcoming challenges.

Finally, the chapter names financial stress a problem intrinsically inhibiting ecumenical progress in French Polynesia. The consequences of the precarious financial situation include the forced stop of educational programs as well as insufficient funding of ecumenical bodies that can reach as far as withdrawals from these institutions.

The report points out the several successes of Ecumenism in French Polynesia: The churches have raised a strong voice in all kinds of social issues, especially in the matter of nuclear testing, and the establishment of the Ecumenical World Week of Prayer is also considered a remarkable achievement. But the chapter also states that from an Anglican perspective, the relationships with both its sister church in New Caledonia and those with other closely linked churches in the Pacific could indeed be closer. The author also criticizes the missing existence of a national council of churches and emphasizes once again that no agreement on basic doctrinal matters could be reached so far, even if they were addressed.

The chapter provides different perspectives on the future of ecumenism.

First of all, the establishment of the three main ecumenical bodies in the Pacific, PCC, PTC, and SPATS, are considered to “have been basically adequate for strengthening ecumenism in the region”. Despite of the great success in the training of Pacific Islanders, it remains unclear how these successes can trickle down to the grassroots level. Even though communication through modern media has facilitated this process, it is simultaneously inhibited by a too complicated network of overlapping institutions. A possible solution might be the unification of the three main ecumenical bodies. The author of this chapter would clearly advocate such a measure. He argues that such unification would not only improve the financial situation of Pacific institutions, but also those of the partners overseas who are struggling with financial constraints themselves. Additionally, having all bodies operate from the same place would make each institution’s work more effective and productive. The improved financial situation would also ease the relationship with the partner churches overseas, which, no matter how important, can tend to become imbalanced and thus bear the risk of increased imposition of foreign norms on Pacific churches. The author thereby concludes that a too heavy reliance on donors from overseas is not desirable.

The chapter finally concludes that in sight of current challenges, there should be no other choice than to face them not individually, but “in togetherness”. The author furthermore concludes that in French Polynesia, ecumenism has been most vivid and successful at grassroots level, therefore demanding these initiatives to be given priority. He also recommends to strengthen the ecumenical movement by both establishing a national council of churches and by including yet non-participating churches in regional and global

ecumenical institutions. He also stresses the need to address doctrinal issues, proposing to begin with the BEM document, and recommends the regional ecumenical structures to be “centralised organisationally” in order to “promote effectiveness and cost-saving”.

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