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► To cite this version:

Yannick Fer. Religion, Pluralism, and Conflicts in the Pacific Islands. Andrew R. Murphy. The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence, Wiley-Blackwell, pp.461-472, 2011, 10.1002/9781444395747.ch37 . halshs-00622590

HAL Id: halshs-00622590

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00622590>

Submitted on 28 Dec 2022

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Since the first accounts from eighteenth-century navigators (notably the journals of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and James Cook), who described their way of life as a happy and violent “state of nature,” Pacific Island populations have gained a specific place in the Western imaginary. This vast region stretching from Easter Island (Rapa Nui) to Papua New Guinea comprises a multitude of islands, languages, and cultures, usually divided into three groups: Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. They share a similar religious history, marked by the abandonment of local religions (imply- ing, in many cases, rituals of human sacrifice) to embrace Christianity brought by missions expanding from Polynesia (beginning in Tahiti, in 1797) to all the Pacific islands (during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). This contrast between the violence of former practices and the new Pax Christiana, emphasized by early Western observers and missionaries, has inspired some simplistic representations of traditional religions and Christianity in Oceania, including indigenous narratives of conversion, which univocally depict the former as an erstwhile source of violence and the latter as the source of a new peace (Jolly 1996: 177).

Christian missions have indeed contributed to the emergence of a new political order, eradicating local conflicts and traditional warfare. But within this same time- frame, rivalries between Catholics and Protestants and alliances between missionaries, indigenous chiefs, and colonial powers have fostered new – sometimes bloody – antagonisms. The encounter between Christianity and local beliefs has itself generated manifestations of religious intolerance, “witch-hunting” being the most spectacular. In recent decades, Pacific

Island societies have also experienced a deep and rapid diversification of Christianity, linked with strong migrations and urbanization. This new diversity, as Charles Forman warned in 1990, could “break the well-established relation of Christianity to the communal sense of identity ... [and] destroy the role of religion as provider of the ultimate coherence for the society, and make it a challenger of the society” (1990: 30).

[462] So while most Pacific Island societies today enjoy a relatively peaceful religious climate, some tension and uncertainty remain around the role of religion in contemporary sources of conflict and violence. The first such area is in the management of pluralism: religious representations of identity and difference become decisive as members of a single group or family split into potentially exclusive religious memberships, while religious differences merge with ethnic boundaries. The attitude of churches in this domain strongly influences the response to a second issue: the capacity of religious actors to intervene as mediators in the resolution of conflicts, or (at the other extreme) to become actively involved in – symbolic or real – struggles between communities. Finally, the effectiveness of Pacific Island Christian churches in the reduction of “ordinary” violence, especially within the family, still depends on the evolution of ongoing debates between advocates of gender equality and defenders of male domination, presented as both a traditional and biblical principle.

Mission, Colonization, and Violence

In 1815, the Tahitian chief Tati, allied with Protestant missionaries from the London Missionary Society, declared to one of them (“with great emphasis,” as W. Ellis observes) that “if God had not sent his word at the time he did, wars, infant-murder, human sacrifices, etc. would have made an end of the small remnant of the nation” (Ellis 1829: 31). Missionaries reached Polynesia even as these Pacific Island societies were gripped by violent struggles for political and religious hegemony, and they participated in the pacification of social life by supporting the ambitions of those first local chiefs who converted to Christianity. Thus Protestantism became dominant in the Windward Islands

in 1815 after the battle of Fei Pi, which established the supremacy of the Pomare Christian dynasty¹ over the chiefs defending traditional religion.

This unification process, which relied on the conjunction of political, military, and religious forces, was later transfigured by Christian churches into a step from “darkness” into “light,” and Christian values actually became the moral and legal cornerstones of the new society. But the contrast between this Christian era and the former life of Oceania populations has often been emphasized “for rhetorical reasons, as part of the projects of mission and state to pacify, convert and reform,” while violence inherent in the Western societies of that time and the Western use of violence in the Pacific has been de-emphasized (Jolly 1996: 177). In fact, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain and French annexations in the Pacific and the concomitant exacerbation of Catholic-Protestant rivalries brought mission and colonization much closer to one another than they had previously been. After the establishment of a penitentiary colony in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century, the British Crown notably took control of New Zealand (in 1841) and Fiji (in 1874), where British Protestant missions foreran political colonization. By contrast, French protectorates on Wallis and Futuna and on Tahiti, followed in 1853 by the annexation of New Caledonia, facilitated the progress of Catholic mission work. Until 1984, one could read on the facade of the cathedral at Noumea an inscription claiming that “the Church gave New Caledonia to France,” and the first Marist missionaries who landed in the northeast of Grande Terre in December 1843 were transported there by the French navy, with instructions to lead [463] the island’s chiefs to request French protection (Terrier 2005: 82). Political and religious conflicts arising in Europe thus intertwined in several Pacific Islands with local power struggles, generating violent conflicts between supporters of the two camps. In the Loyalty Islands (New Caledonia), for example, a series of troubles broke out in the 1860s–1870s, and even led to the establishment, in 1875 in Mare, of a demarcation line between the territories of Naisseline, a chief converted to Protestantism and supported by the British missionary John Jones, and rival chiefdoms allied with the French Catholic Marist Brothers.

The introduction of Christianity alone did not entail an eradication of social violence, which depended more widely on the local power structures in relation to colonial interventions. From the 1930s, when the first Westerners – and the first Christian missions – penetrated into the Mount Hagen region (Highlands of Papua New Guinea), until the 1990s, “the potential for violence was never eradicated,” as P. J. Stewart and A. Strathern point out (2002: 69). Under colonial constraint, conflicts became encompassed during the 1960s by the circuits of *moka* exchanges of wealth, then reappeared in the mid-1980s following the killing of a youth in a drinking spree. “The establishment of peace was uneasy and difficult, abetted by the erection of a memorial including a Christian cross at an interchange point between the territories of [the two clans involved in the conflict]”: Christianity intervenes as a symbolic resource with which to help bind the memory of the dead with the restoration of peace among the living.

The most spectacular impact of Christianization on Pacific societies was less the definitive eradication of violence as a social form of confrontation than the rapid extinction of the ritual violence which had contributed to the continuity and cohesion of the traditional sociopolitical systems. The “rites of terror” of Melanesian initiations, intertwining extreme emotions and cognitive shocks (Whitehouse 1996: 710), no longer punctuate the stages of life of the converted populations. On the other hand, belief in the effectiveness of an “ordinary sorcery,” which cares for the relationships between individuals and ancestors’ or natural spirits, did not disappear as suddenly. Tensions arising from the coexistence of Christian morality and pragmatic use of sorcery to dispel misfortune produce, in many situations described by anthropologists (notably in Papua New Guinea), episodes of “purification.” Witch-hunts, directed against those considered responsible for social disorder, and the destruction of sorcery materials each emphasize the coexistence of two spiritual worlds. Since the 1970s and 1980s, this confrontation gained new intensity along with the rise of Charismatic Protestantism (Barker 2003), whose imagination is haunted by the “final battle” between the Holy Spirit and satanic forces. This “battle” is usually limited to a battle of words – passionate sermons and prayers. But it can also manifest in more

aggressive acts of religious intolerance, directed not just against remaining traditional beliefs but also against non-Christian or even “heterodox” Christian denominations. This potential threat to religious peace underlines one of the major social stakes of the growing religious diversity in the Pacific Islands.

The Impact of Religious Pluralism on the Pacific Island societies

In French Polynesia, the census of 1951 mentioned only five religious organizations, indicating that a quarter of the population was then Catholic, slightly more than half [464] (54.81 percent) Protestant, and that the remaining churches (Seventh-Day Adventist and Mormon) comprised only 6.41 percent of inhabitants. Sixty years later, one French Polynesian in four belongs neither to the Catholic nor historical Protestant churches; Adventists and Mormons make up 16 percent of the population, while Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Baha’i also form part of the new religious landscape (Fer and Malogne-Fer 2006: 659).

The relative decline of Protestant churches stemming from the nineteenth-century missions and the growth of Adventist, Mormon, or Pentecostal churches are common features of Oceania’s societies today. The Pacific Island states guarantee religious freedom, and Oceania rarely figures in cases of religious intolerance or violence mentioned by international human rights bodies. Rather, the multiplication of competing denominations and the scattering of religious membership primarily affect family unity. They generate local mini-conflicts, on the small islands or in the villages where the alliance between traditional chiefs and historical churches is still dominant. In the opinion of leaders from such communities, joining churches of the “professing” type, which emphasize the need for personal salvation, foments division and promotes an “individualism” that puts community solidarity and authority at risk.

Due to migration, education, and the development of transportation, spaces for sociability have expanded beyond the church, village or island community of origin, leading to a growing proportion of religiously mixed couples.² As this intermingling involves quite

varied expressions of Christianity, it may foster the emergence of a kind of “civil religion” transcending denominational boundaries. But in many Pacific islands, the transmission of religious identity and adult conversions continue to crystallize tensions between the family (acting as a “collective subject”) and family members claiming their right to make “personal choices.” The conviction that salvation is a matter of personal choice indeed contradicts ethical dispositions that traditionally incline each member of the family to “feel required to act as part of a united body” and thus to submit to the decisions made by spokesmen of the collective interest of the family (Bourdieu 1998: 70). Women are particularly exposed to violent reactions by their male partners. One Pentecostal woman in Moorea, French Polynesia, said:

For me it was not easy to attend the meetings. There were fights at home, in my family. And my husband wanted to beat me as I was to be baptized by immersion ... My family didn't want to see me anymore: among my brothers and sisters, only one brother said I've made the right choice. One of my brothers is a [Protestant] deacon, a sister is also a deacon's wife: they were really upset.³

The adhesion of converts to a minority church often isolates them from a community life mostly structured by church activities. This isolation is further accentuated by the emphasis that most new missionary churches put on the need to break with “the world,” and their hostility to the local Christian tradition. At the outset of the 1990s, H. Jebens was able to observe the coexistence of Catholics and Adventists in a remote village of the South Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Adventism has experienced a remarkable growth there, numbering 520,000 official members in 2000, and it is particularly strong in these mountainous Highlands, a region only lately Christianized where [465] Adventist churches are contesting the supremacy of the Catholic and Protestant churches. The members of the Adventist community, Jebens notices, identify Catholicism with “powers of the Devil.” They “not only prophesy God's punishment for the Catholic villagers, they also believe that they will fall victims to the Catholics in future themselves” (2005: 138). However, he underlines: “Whereas Catholics and Adventists both claim officially that relationships of kinship between them have been broken off entirely, unofficially they do both admit that

they share brideprice presentations with one another, visit one another in the health centre and vote for the same candidate at elections” (2005: 195).

This gap between official and unofficial levels does not exist in places where the traditional spokesmen of family and community have maintained the capacity to impose a definition of cultural authenticity which bans all religious dissidence. “The individual does not exist,” stated the Rev. Oka Fau’olo in 2002. Chairman of the Samoan National Council of Churches, and erstwhile chairman of the main historical Protestant Church (the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa), he went on to say: “We belong to each other. We live as a family and our concern is for the good of the family. This is the way a peaceful life is maintained” (Schaer 2002). By the end of the 1990s, the confrontation between this kind of religious representation of cultural authenticity – binding a people, a land, and a church – and the proselytism and/or the effervescence of new missionary churches had given rise to episodes of violence in several Samoan villages. Facing the rapid growth of evangelical movements – especially the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (6.6 percent of the population in 2001) – some traditional chiefs (*matais*) then adopted aggressive strategies against these “sheep thieves,” outlawing practitioners of the new churches and asking them to desist or face punishment. In 1998, in the mainly Methodist village of Salamumu, several members of a Bible group established by a young man who had recently returned from the United States suffered destruction of property, violence, and banishment. In 2000, the Samoan Supreme Court, ruling on a similar case, “concerning the banishment of 32 people from Saipipi for conducting Bible classes on communal land” (Schaer 2002), found in favor of the “new church,” stating that the Constitution of Samoa allows for religious freedom. According to M. Ernst, missionaries of the Jehovah’s Witnesses are also “sometimes banned from entering a village, threatened or even beaten up by villagers” (2006: 559). A report on international religious freedom in 2009 mentions similar occurrences on the Polynesian island of Tuvalu, where in 2006 – despite a High Court injunction against such action – a local council of elders passed a resolution that banned all new churches and threatened local civil servants with dismissal if they worshipped with the Brethren Church

(US Department of State 2009).

Religious Actors in local Conflicts

In the past decade, the empowerment of civil society through support to nongovernmental and faith-based organizations has become a major focus of strategies by international development agencies and regional powers, which aim to contribute to [466] social and political stability in the Pacific Island states (Eves 2008: 1). But local opposition to religious diversity shows that contributions by churches to the resolution of social tensions depend largely on their conception of an individual's primary and secondary belonging. By enforcing at the village level a strict (compulsory) association between kinship and confessional identities, and by extending this interwoven relationship to larger territorial or community entities, churches put themselves at odds with the political ideology of "civil society." Indeed, this ideology implies the emergence of secondary institutions and groups, distinct from the primary groups of socialization (like family) and based on individuals' freely chosen membership within a pluralist society. It also implies that churches will participate in building a public space for democratic debate, and not adopt the fundamentalist stance of a necessary "retreat from the world" (Eves 2008: 4), nor any ideology of religious and/or ethnic supremacy. This issue is well illustrated by the very different roles churches have played in two Pacific Island theaters of conflict: in the Solomon Islands, during the armed confrontation that broke out in 1999–2000 between groups from the islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal; and in Fiji, following the 2000 coup that aimed to impose the political supremacy of indigenous Fijians at the expense of the Indo-Fijian community. Weir thus wrote in October 2000:

[In the Solomon Islands], the cross-cutting allegiances of denomination and place, and the tradition of indigenous action, enable Christian women and men to constructively address the current tensions and promote reconciliation. In Fiji, however, the identification of most Methodists with the discourse of Fijian paramountcy puts the MCF [Methodist Church of Fiji] firmly in one camp, with little ability to reach other communities or to act as an effective agent of reconciliation ... (2000: 51)

The Methodist Church of Fiji and the Indigenous Cause

For more than a century, the population of Fiji has comprised two distinct communities, one of indigenous origin (Fijians) and the other of Indian origin (Indians or Indo-Fijians, descended from the late nineteenth-century migration organized by British colonials to supply local sugar cane plantations with labor forces). Land tenure and religious membership are widely interwoven with these ethnic boundaries: Indo-Fijians are mainly Hindu (75 percent) or Muslim (17 percent), while almost all indigenous Fijians are Christians. The depth of Christianity's roots in Fijian culture and the indigenous monopoly over land ownership foster the idea of a Christian land and Christian nation, in which the claim of a "Christian state" – excluding Indo-Fijians de facto from politics – is grounded (Ryle 2009). In April 1987, Indo-Fijians made up 49 percent of the population, outnumbering the Fijian community (46 percent), and Indian leaders occupied prominent positions in the newly elected government. An initial military coup aiming to reestablish indigenous supremacy inaugurated an era of interethnic tensions and political instability that endures to this day. Notably, this has led several thousand Indo-Fijians to leave the country, reducing their proportion in the population to 37.5 percent in 2007 (compared to 54.7 percent Fijians).

[467] In 2000, the Methodist Church, representing 34.6 percent of the total population and more than half of the Fijian indigenous community, joined the advocates of a Fijian and Christian state by supporting the government that sprang from a new coup against the Indo-Fijian prime minister M. Chaudhry. This support was based on a nationalist version of the Pacific theologies, whose emergence during the 1960s accompanied the political process of decolonization in the Pacific Islands. Developed by Pacific Protestant theologians involved in the Pacific Conference of Churches⁴ and the Pacific Theological College (opened in 1967 in the Fijian capital of Suva), these theologies emphasize the links connecting Pacific peoples to their cultures and to the land. The concept of *vanua*,

expressing this close connection in Fijian language, is the cornerstone of the reflection on Fijian identity formulated by the theologian I. S. Tuwere (2002). From this perspective, *vanua* (which includes, through the land, tradition and kinship), *lotu* (the church), and *matatinu* (temporal power) form the three pillars of “a mainly Fiji Methodist religious and cultural ideal structure” (Ryle 2009: 82). In contradiction to Tuwerean thought, this concept of social harmony became an ideology legitimating the “indigenous principle of Fijian paramountcy, based on traditional hierarchies and ownership of the land” (Weir 2000: 50), and was transposed to the political field by a hardline fringe of the Fijian Methodist Church.

After the 2000 coup, the Methodist Church and the main Fijian Pentecostal churches formed a new alliance, the Assembly of Christian Churches, with the aims of unifying Fijians in Christian faith and contributing to national reconciliation. This cooperation between the promoters of cultural theology and evangelical churches (more focused on personal salvation) underlines the growing influence – and ambiguity – of two concepts spread throughout the Pacific Islands by international Pentecostal networks. The first is a theology of Spiritual Warfare, which pursues a reterritorialization of religious identity by identifying the tutelary spirits of places; this leads, on one hand, to recognition of indigenous peoples as spiritual gate-keepers of the land, and on the other to the identification of non-Christian religions as strongholds of demonic power that need to be fought. The second concept is that of reconciliation. At a first level, the biblical call “First be reconciled with your brother” (Matthew 5:24) leads to the unity of Christians, seen as a necessary stage preparing the establishment of a peaceful dialogue with non-Christians or “foreigner” communities. The Christian concept of reconciliation can thus provide the original impetus for a social pacification and the building of “multicultural citizenship” based on the recognition of minorities’ rights (Redonnet 2001: 484). But most Pentecostal movements rather emphasize, in a more activist manner, “reconciliation in Christ” understood as a duty to convert these same non-Christians in order to establish a Christian state and to reach the only lasting peace: that which unifies “brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Christian Peacemakers and Martyrs in the Solomon Islands

The religious construction of identity as exclusive or inclusive, as a primary or secondary belonging, plays an essential role in the regulation of conflicts in the Pacific Island nations. Efforts deployed by Solomon Island Christian leaders to end the confrontation [468] between Malaitan and Guadalcanese factions demonstrate how, in contrast with the Fijian case, concerted initiatives from the main religious denominations can contribute to effective mediation by disentangling ethnic (or Island) and religious belonging.

In 1999, tensions associated with Malaitan migration and land ownership in rural Guadalcanal and around the capital city, Honiara, led to the expulsion of about 20,000 Malaitans by a Guadalcanese militia, the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). A few months later, the constitution of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) contributed to a rapid escalation of violence, culminating in June 2000 with the forced resignation of the Malaitan prime minister, B. Ulufa'alu – accused of not actively defending his Island community's interests. At first glance, the religious background of this conflict opposed an indigenous traditionalist movement to those migrants influenced by evangelical Protestantism. The IFM members seemed to come mainly from the Moro Movement, a breakaway group from the Catholic Church that appeared in the 1960s, and which claimed the need to return to Guadalcanal "kastom" (custom). On the other side, most of the youth involved in the MEF came from the main Pentecostal Church in the Solomon Islands, the South Sea Evangelical Church (Ernst 2006: 166, 183). And yet it was an Adventist minister who in June 2000 conducted an interdenominational negotiating team, since the spokesmen from both militant groups were members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Weir 2000: 49).

Interventions by the Christian churches took place within the framework of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA), "one of the most inclusive ecumenical bodies anywhere," covering 90 percent of the population (Weir 2000: 49). Each church made use of its specific connections with the warring parties while all the churches maintained a

united front in the name of Christian values, which thus became a rare element of Solomon Islands national unity. These values were particularly embodied by an indigenous religious order, the Melanesian Brotherhood, originating from Solomon Islands Anglicanism (the Church of Melanesia, which comprises a third of the population), whose initiatives were supported by the SICA. Founded in 1925 as an Anglican evangelistic order, the Melanesian Brotherhood gathers men who have taken a vow not to marry, and to practice poverty, chastity, and obedience. Moving from one village to another throughout the Solomon Islands, Brotherhood members have become very popular for their simple manners and the depth of their spiritual engagement. By way of their involvement in missionary work in the Pacific Islands (until the 1950s) and beyond, in the Philippines, they also nurture Christian contemporary prophecies which see the Solomon Islands at the “ends of the earth,” initiating a “reversing process” that will spread the ultimate “revival” to the world.⁵ During the crisis, “The Brothers earned themselves a well deserved reputation for fearlessness and great humility by placing themselves in the line of fire, taking religious services with both militia groups, encouraging them not to shoot or act with violence, and even rescuing several kidnapped hostages” (Fraenkel, quoted in Ernst 2006: 176).

In 2003, the murder of seven Brothers by a militia leader opposed to the Townsville Peace Agreement signed in October 2000 elevated the Melanesian Brothers to national martyrdom. Their outstanding sacrifice was honored in 2004 by first prize in the regional category of the Fourth Pacific Human Rights Awards for their peacemaking role. It should also be noted that these heroic Melanesian men, who renounce [469] traditional attributes of masculinity and gain *mana*, or higher spiritual authority, throw light on the essential link between the social management of violence and religious constructions of gender identity.

Religion, gender Identities, and “ordinary” Violence in the Pacific Islands

As Fife (1995) has argued, colonialism and missionization offered new masculine values often in “marked contrast to older forms of male effectiveness,” and many men in Papua

New Guinea enthusiastically embraced values that underpinned processes of pacification and viewed violence as “un-Christian” (Macintyre 2008: 187).

In Oceania, as in many other places, this transformation of gender norms has not eradicated all of the actual or symbolic violence that many men consider necessary for asserting their masculinity. Neither is the influence of Christianity in Pacific Islands societies sufficient to dispel phenomena such as Papua New Guinea’s *raskol* gangs, “community members turned criminals who associate loosely together to rob, rape and terrorize others in mostly urban contexts” (Stewart and Strathern 2002: 72). Nevertheless, as S. Dinnen remarks, religious norms offer delinquents an opportunity to escape the logic of honor inherent in this kind of violent sociability, by proclaiming their conversion to a born-again Christian Church: “Dinnen suggests that these forms of surrender and appropriation of a Christian identity constitute more hopeful ways of meeting the problem than the forcefully suppressive actions of police” (Stewart and Strathern 2002: 78; Dinnen and Rey 2000).

Beyond this “new identity” offered by the conversion and the historical transformation of masculine values, references to Jesus Christ as a role model for Christian masculinity still encounter some resistance in the Pacific Islands, even among Evangelicals. “Sometimes, men, we tend to keep everything to ourselves, to think it’s a shame to say we are feeling down, or to cry. That’s ridiculous. No man has been more virile than Jesus Christ,” said a Pentecostal minister in 2001 in Tahiti.⁶ This Christic model coexists in many Pacific Island churches with a conception of masculine domination claimed to be rooted both in indigenous cultural tradition and in the Bible. Thus, religion today is less a key actor for change in gender representations (which influence “ordinary” and especially domestic violence) than the main social space where an ongoing debate can be held on gender identities and relationships. Within historical Protestantism, women’s access to ordained ministry has thrown light on the growing tensions between contesting claims for equality and for maintaining gender hierarchies. This access to ordained ministry has been fostered by the dynamism of women’s church fellowships and international ecumenical bodies. It contradicts a traditional system of church authority which relies on a gender hierarchy,

illustrated by the position ascribed in the Pacific Islands to “Mrs Pastor”: the role of pastor’s wife is essential to parish functioning but subordinated to the only official ministry, that of the husband. So the rise of women ministers generates both a critical reflection on the symbolical basis of masculine domination and hostile reactions calling for respect for the “natural” order of gender (Malogne-Fer 2008). In this debate, as in the connected debate on [470] domestic violence, Pacific Island women today tend to refuse the fake opposition between individual rights and indigenous cultures, considering (as does this Ni-Vanuatu woman, quoted by Jolly) that “ ‘the roots of violence are cultural’ (but so are the means of digging up those roots). ‘Attitudes to violence, like culture, are not static. They depend on our needs and our interpretations of what we want to be, how we want to be, and how we get there. To be static is to be dead’ ” (Jolly 1996: 182–3).

Conclusion

Most of the constitutions of Pacific Island independent states today proclaim Christianity as a cornerstone of their national identity, alongside cultural tradition. The combination of symbolic resources offered by these two registers (religious and cultural), now considered as inseparable, plays an essential role in the regulation of violence. Thus cultural values of solidarity and consensus can blend with the Christian principle of individual moral responsibility and contribute to the pacification of social life. Conversely, a conservative interpretation of traditional hierarchies can find in the Bible arguments in order to legitimate local relationships of domination generating violence. Despite the effective contribution of many Pacific Island churches to a global reduction of social violence, relationships between religion and violence in the region are still ambiguous; they are deeply interwoven with a set of dynamic evolutions, ongoing debates and tensions on religious pluralism, cultural or gender identities, fluctuating relationships between religion and politics, and with the contemporary reshaping of family/community ties.

The young generation born in the important Pacific Island communities established since the 1960s in Australia and New Zealand will undoubtedly be key actors in the ongoing

transformations of cultural and religious identities in the region. Connected to their islands of origin by constant transnational circulation, they grew up in a multicultural, multifaith context, marked by a growing proportion of non-Christian faiths from recent Asian migrations in these two countries. They are today experiencing both a relative decline of religious practice and the rise of a mainly evangelical Christian activism grounded in the conviction that Christianity is part of a distinctive Pacific Island cultural identity. Future relationships between religion, (in)tolerance and violence may largely depend on the effects of these activist reformulations of identities on the Pacific Island societies.

Notes

1. The dynasty founded by Tahitian chief Pomare I (1743–1803), who in 1797 welcomed the first missionaries from the London Missionary Society on his own land in Matavai Bay (east coast of Tahiti). His son Pomare II was baptized in 1819 and the family reigned over Tahiti and its islands until the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1842.
2. A survey carried out in 2000 in Tahiti by the Louis Harris Institute showed that the rate of religious homogeneity within couples greatly decreased in a generation. It totaled 85% [471] among the Catholic or Protestant parents of the people questioned, 92% among Mormons. However, in the following generation, that rate fell to 70% among Catholics, 62.5% among Protestants, and 50% among Mormons.
3. Interview with Maïere, Assembly of God of Moorea, Dec. 22, 2000 (Fer 2005: 381).
4. The Pacific Conference of Churches (est. 1961) is an ecumenical body gathering the historical Protestant and Anglican churches of the Pacific Islands.
5. This “vision” is notably proclaimed by a regional Evangelical network, the Pacific Prayer Assembly, whose first meeting was hosted in 1991 by the Solomon Islands.
6. Pastor Louis Levant, Assembly of God of Papeete, Tahiti (French Polynesia), predication on September 7, 2001.

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