If the official statistics are to be believed, Papua New Guinea now ranks among the most thoroughly Christian of nations, at least in the raw terms of church membership. According to the 2000 census, more than 96% of the rapidly growing population self-affiliates with one or another of some 200 denominations, a number that may underestimate the actual figures. Approximately 27% belong to the Roman Catholic Church, making it by far the largest of the denominations. Like other “mainline churches,” growth in Catholic congregations has largely stalled while large numbers of Christians are turning to Pentecostal and Fundamentalist congregations. Thus, between 1990 and 2000, the Catholic population grew by 26% while the Seventh-Day Adventist Church saw its rolls expand by 76%, making it the fourth largest denomination in the country. Six years later, they have almost certainly passed the United Church to move into third place behind the Lutherans (Gibbs 2006).

In most places, the initial confrontation between missionaries and traditional religion is a rapidly receding memory. The vast majority of Papua New Guineans are at least second generation Christians, and many in the coastal areas can trace their Christian ancestry back more than a century. While notions of “tradition” figure centrally in the ways that people construct their Christian identities, the urgent question in an increasingly sectarian field is not whether people should become Christians but what kind of Christians they should be.

In part because scholarship in Papua New Guinea has been so heavily dominated by anthropologists and deeply invested in documenting the remnants of pre-contact culture, studies focused upon conversion and the local establishment of Christianity have been slow to emerge. Originally published in 1995, Holger Jebens’ *Wege zum Himmel* was likely the first full-length monograph on the subject to appear in print (although it was preceded by several unpublished dissertations in Papua New Guinea and books dealing with Christians in the Solomon Islands). This translation of the earlier work makes Jebens’ ground-breaking study available to a much wider audience. Based upon careful and sensitive ethnographic fieldwork, *Pathways to Heaven* provides a fascinating window on the process of conversion as perceived and experienced by a Highlands community. Even more significantly, it remains the only full-length study of local sectarianism in any Melanesian society. Jebens’ detailed account of the shifting fortunes of the Roman Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventists Churches in a Papua New Guinean village takes us well beyond the official numbers to probe what adherence to these different churches actually means to their respective members.

At the time of Jebens’ 10 month residence in 1990-91, approximately 600 people lived in Pairundu village, most members of the Kome clan. The Kome belong to the Kewa language group in the Southern Highlands Province. Remote and economically marginal by Papua New Guinea standards, the region came under effective Australian control only in the 1950s. Roman Catholic and Lutheran missionaries entered the region in 1958. A number of Kome converted to Catholicism soon after. By the early 1990s, almost two thirds of the population belonged to the Catholic Church, served mainly by local catechists and evangelists and periodic visits by European priests responsible for the district. A handful of families joined the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA) in the mid-1980s. Between 1987 and 1989, a Pentecostal movement...
swept through the area, but this was moribund by the time of the study. In July 1991, Jebens witnessed a mass baptism in which the SDAs doubled their numbers, mostly at the Catholics’ expense. At this point, the SDAs made up 25% of the village population to the Catholics’ 50%. Jebens has little to say about the quarter or so of the population that had not been baptized, although his account of the collapse of the indigenous cults many years earlier indicates that these were by no means traditionalist holdouts.

Jebens approaches his subject systematically. The opening section, making up approximately 60% of the text, is devoted to an ethnographic and historic appraisal of Pairundu. This is followed by a short section analyzing patterns of religious change in the village. The final section of the book broadens the analysis to view Pairundu in the comparative frameworks of Christian adherence in Papua New Guinea and the global rise of fundamentalism as a response to modernity. While of interest, so much recent work has appeared that this last section very much show its age, as Jebens admits in a helpful—but too short!—new Preface to the volume. For this review, I focus upon the ethnography.

At the time of Jebens’ residence in Pairundu, the Kome had long abandoned the most visible elements of their traditional religion: cult houses and associated rituals focused primarily upon healing. Interviews with elders as well as earlier ethnographic accounts of neighbouring Kewa-speaking communities, however, suggests that the more subtle and earlier aspects of religious practice and assumptions remain strong, especially in remote, subsistence based villages like Pairundu. Jebens points to two traits in particular: “a primacy of action over belief that points to the villagers’ basic pragmatic attitude” (pg. 65) and a fundamental stress on reciprocal equivalence. Given their pragmatic view of spiritual beliefs and willingness to experiment with ritual forms in the past, the Kome had little difficulty incorporating what appeared to be an infinitely more potent religious system into their lives during the early period of conversion. This is not to say that Christianity as understood and practiced by the Kome merely represents old “traditional” wine in a new Christian bottle. Jebens detects in the initial conversion to Catholicism and subsequent movement towards more fundamentalist forms of Christianity a parallel weakening of social coherence and increasing individualism as the Kome struggle with the challenges of modernity. Still, many indigenous elements of religion, such as magical practices, co-existent alongside conventional church services while, at a more profound level, cultural orientations towards ritual efficacy and morality continue to inform individual understandings of Christian teachings.

Jebens makes a convincing case for cultural continuity. This continuity, however, persists in the face of insistence from both Catholic and Adventist Kome that they have rejected their traditional cultural ways in the hopes of finding the “pathway to heaven.” There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of these claims which Jebens documents with a richness of direct quotations and which accord with similar accounts from recent studies elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. What is fresh and significant about Jebens’ approach is that he doesn’t merely take such statements at face value—as indicating missionary “success”—nor does he present them as naïve misunderstandings of the reality visible only to the ethnographer. Instead, he takes them seriously as clues to what Christianity means to the Kome in the context of their actual historical experience.

Whether Catholic or Adventist, Kome Christians perceive going to heaven as their decisive goal. The path, they believe, is modeled by Europeans, who they imagine as hard-working, organized and governed by rules originally set by Jesus. Hence, the attainment of salvation rests upon hard work, following the moral prescriptions lain down by church
authorities and regular church attendance (pg. 110). The differences between Catholics and Adventists turn less on the specifics of theology and ritual practices—although these are quite significant—as in the rigidity of their formulations of salvation. Adventists insist upon more stringent rules and prohibitions, a far greater personal knowledge of the Bible and more self-conscious imitation of European styles of dress and behaviour. For both groups, however, the road to salvation follows the same line as that to economic development, understood as a gift from the outside, associated with whites (pg. 165) and, ultimately, the Christian god. Heaven amounts to a “comprehensive equality” (pg. 119) between all believers, whether brown or white. Thus, ironically, Kome views on Christianity reject the ways of the past in order to realize its underlying moral principles in the face of the unprecedented challenges of the present.

Jebens sees the Catholics, Adventists and Holy Spirit Movement as forming an evolutionary sequence, each stage marked by increasing hostility to the indigenous past, more stringent ritual observation and a greater embrace of the moral values and orientations of modernity. There is a certain sense to this, although Jebens’ study lacks the historic depth to make a convincing argument. Pathways to Heaven makes a more compelling contribution in documenting the intimate negotiations required by sectarian division in Melanesian communities. Not surprisingly, Jebens’ informants offered strong opinions. Many Adventists regarded the Catholics as damned not only because of their refusal to adhere to SDA strictures but also because of widely circulating apocalyptic stories that identified the Pope as the Anti-Christ whose army of believers would rise up to attack Adventists in the End Times which everyone (including Catholics) believed were on hand. For their part, many Catholics disowned relatives who converted and, of course, resented the slurs about their faith and morality. All the same, given the density of kinship and marriage ties, close residence and shared histories, living together in the village required ongoing compromises, a strategic toning down of differences in public rhetoric and a willingness to overlook contradictions.

One of the great strengths of this fascinating ethnography rests with its author’s careful documenting of the details of the routine aspects of Christian life in Pairundu. This includes a systematic description of doctrines, services, the place of the Bible and the contents of sermons. Welcome attention is paid to the roles and opinions of the local lay evangelists responsible for village church activities and the position of village congregations within wider church networks. The book is especially impressive in its copious use of direct quotations from informants in the main text and generous footnotes. Reading through these, more than anything else, challenges older although still prevalent views of Christianity as a Western imposition. Like most Melanesians, the Kome are deeply troubled by their present and worried about their future. Christianity, as they understand it, contributes to the urgency of their predicament and promises, however vaguely, a way out. It binds them to the glittering world of Europeans, as they imagine them, while reinforcing their separation from that world. It urges a single truth embodied in sectarian division. It rejects the pagan past in the name of an embracing equality that lies at the heart of indigenous morality and spirituality. It is very much a work in progress. Given the repeated crises that have rocked Papua New Guinea since Independence and the virtual collapse of government services in many rural areas, it remains an open question whether the Kome or others like them will continue to conflate the pathway to heaven with Europeans and economic development. There seems little doubt, however, that Christianity in its variegated forms will remain important to their sense of identity and aspirations.

References