In the 1790s newly formed British mission societies began sending evangelists to the far corners of the world. Thirty years later a few missions had become firmly established in the Pacific islands and Africa. Reinforcements and the entry of more denominations steadily increased the missionary presence in following years. This early work would prove to be a prelude to the colonial period, which unleashed a massive effort to convert Europe's new subjects. Yet the missionary efforts that occurred ahead of Empire had important consequences. At home, reports on the efforts in exotic locales served to elevate the missionary movement from the margins of respectable Christianity to the centre of British public life. In the mission fields the pioneers largely invented through trial and error basic practices and standards. Most importantly, they established beachheads for the later expansion of Christianity by preparing and encouraging converts who in time became the main emissaries of the Word in foreign places.

Before the mid-1870s few missionaries could have imagined that almost all the Pacific and Africa would soon become the colonial property of the Great Powers. The pre-colonial history of modern missions is of interest not just for understanding what came later but also for what might have been in the absence of European imperialism. The missionaries of the early nineteenth century conducted their labours as guests of indigenous rulers and peoples, not as colonial agents. Usually far from the protection of their government and sponsors, they relied heavily upon local populations for their security and basic material needs. Most quickly grasped that progress required patience and compromise. By the mid-century, turning necessity into a virtue, Henry Venn, the influential Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, made the rapid creation of autonomous indigenous churches the highest goal of missionary efforts. Some missions came very close to achieving this in the Pacific. While the colonial takeover would stimulate a massive
expansion of missionary efforts, ironically enough it set back the goal of creating truly localized churches by many years.

This chapter focuses on developments in missions to the Pacific islands with some comparative notes on Africa in order to highlight the key interactions that shaped the early reception of Christianity on a frontier where indigenous peoples still retained autonomy over their lives. Particularly important were the interactions with local elites, which established the political limits of missionary penetration; interactions with new Christians, which refashioned imported religious ideas to local assumptions and aspirations; and interactions with other European agents on the scene, which, together with missions, conditioned the entry of indigenous peoples into the spreading economic and political hegemony of the Great Powers.

Missionaries and Chiefs

The sponsors of the first missions to the Pacific and Africa possessed an extraordinary confidence that the mere presence of the cross would win ‘savage’ hearts and minds from pagan darkness. The bearers of the cross were, to a large extent, men and women of modest education and means, sent out with scant provisions to distant peoples with whose languages, customs, and political circumstances they were utterly unfamiliar. Furthermore, they travelled to places where interference from European traders and adventurers had already disrupted communities by introducing new diseases and by aggravating violence between competing factions for coveted trade goods. Some missionaries were killed upon arrival, the victims of acts of vengeance against wrongs perpetrated by earlier visitors. Others fell to malaria or fled in the face of war. Those who settled down found that the act of proclaiming the gospel truth carried its own risks. A series of missionaries to the southern New Hebrides met their ends after declaring to the terrified natives that the god they represented was the source of the terrible epidemics decimating their people. Some found solace in the bottle and a few left the mission to live as natives themselves. When reading the accounts of these early days, the greatest wonder is that any missions got established at all.

Survival largely depended on carefully cultivating alliances with local leaders. Mission directors formally required their agents to submit themselves to local authorities and not engage in political activities, although few could resist offering advice to chiefs when the opportunity arose. Further, most missionaries of this period ‘believed in the ultimate rightness of a
monarchical form of government" and succeeded in deluding themselves that the native 'kings' they encountered resembled European monarchs in terms of public legitimacy and power. Above all else, they assumed that if they could win over the elite, the rest of the population would soon follow.

By attaching themselves to one or another 'king', the early missionaries implicated themselves in long-running political contests they could scarcely comprehend and over which they had little control. The cost of association with a chief on the losing side of a conflict could be exile or sudden death. But ascendant chiefs also caused problems. Once the novelty of the missionaries' peculiar rituals wore off, and especially once they ran out of supplies and became dependent upon local people for survival, missionaries found themselves in a precarious position, at best tolerated by their patrons. In Tahiti the early missionaries were quickly reduced to rags, living in hovels, their plight made worse by the taunts of small beach communities of castaways and escaped convicts from Australia who curried favour with the chiefs by ridiculing their poverty. In New Zealand, as in southern Africa, the Maori chiefs put 'their' missionaries to work as diplomatic liaisons with European powers and to procure and repair firearms. Thus, 'the Christian community existed in the Maori world on Maori terms'.

With a few exceptions, missionaries to Africa failed to win over local elites prior to the colonial period. Their early converts came mostly from the margins of society: escaped or recovered slaves, war refugees, and other outcasts and displaced people. In the Pacific islands, however, within two decades of their arrival, the missionaries witnessed a massive movement of people from all levels of society into the Church.

Most accounts date the beginnings of Christianity in Polynesia to the arrival in 1797 of thirty 'godly mechanics' sent by the London Missionary Society (LMS) to Tahiti; but a strong claim can also be made for Pomare II's decision in 1812 to become a Christian. The missionary party had tied their fortunes to Pomare's father in the mistaken belief that he controlled the island. Even within the Pomare faction they found, as John Davies complained in 1806, that there was no 'sincere desire of instruction manifested by any as to the truths of the Gospel, but on the contrary much aversion'. While friendlier, Pomare II followed his father's strategy of increasing human sacrifices to the Oro cult to advance his political ambitions while engaging

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in a fondness for drink and homosexual *mahu* attendants. The reasons for Pomare's change of heart remain obscure. Most likely his confidence in Oro had been badly shaken after years of fierce fighting which drove him into exile in 1808. He may also have faltered in the face of a steep population decline in the aftermath of the new diseases, alcohol, and firearms introduced by European intrusions. More positively, he became close to Henry Nott, who stayed on when the other members of the mission party had fled the fighting in 1809. In the end Pomare's choice may have been dictated less by desperation than by a shrewd calculation that the new god would provide him with a spiritual advantage. In fact, Pomare's fortunes did change upon his conversion. He won a decisive battle and for the first time united Tahiti under a single ruler. The missionaries returned to assist this unlikely Constantine who made Christianity the state religion. Tahiti became the base from which the LMS expanded steadily westward—eventually arriving in New Guinea sixty years after Pomare's conversion.

A similar scenario unfolded in Tonga. Unlike Tahiti, Tonga had once been unified under a single ruler, but civil war between the claimants of the three high titles had raged for decades, made more lethal by the introduction of firearms and castaways who knew how to use them effectively. The LMS fled the islands in 1797 after several members of its party were killed. Three decades later Methodists received a warmer reception. A young chief from the northern islands, Täufa'ahau, requested a teacher and then methodically put the new god through a series of tests. Having defied his own patron deity by, among other things, striking its priestess, he declared himself for the *lotu* ('Church'), ordering the destruction of spirit houses in his domain and calling for instruction in Christianity for himself and his people. Following his baptism, 'King George' consolidated the three traditional titles in his person through a mix of skilful diplomacy and bloody warfare, cheered on by the missionaries, who perceived him as a modern-day Saul engaged in a holy crusade against heathenism. Täufa'ahau later helped advance Christianity in neighbouring Fiji by recommending *lotu* to the warrior chief Cakobau and lending him troops to defeat his rivals.

The Fijian case suggests that the centrality of the chiefs to the acceptance of Christianity went beyond the naked exercise of power. Years before Cakobau accepted baptism, Methodist missionaries had convinced many leaders not only of the reality of the Christian god but of his superiority over their own.4

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The conversion of the high chiefs signalled the conversion of the body politic because they actually embodied it. Their own authority rested upon their direct descent from the gods. In the more stratified islands the mana ('sacred potency') of the aristocracy was indexed by highly elaborated ritual protocols and taboos backed by spiritual sanctions and, for commoners, the threat of instant death. The mana of the chiefs was spectacularly displayed in Tahiti and Hawai‘i through large temple complexes and flamboyant religious cults supported by a specialized priesthood. Religion legitimized the chiefs and provided 'sanctions for controlling the population and harnessing its productivity'. For Pomare, Taufa‘ahau, and Cakobau, recognition of Jehovah provided spiritual legitimacy further confirmed by decisive military victories; but stability in their kingdoms depended upon the rapid re-establishment of a state religion. A variation on this theme was played out in Hawai‘i after Ka‘ahumanu, the favourite wife of the late Kamehameha I, who had united the islands, ended the system of public taboos on which the old religious system rested. When American Congregationalist missionaries arrived the following year, in 1820, she and her allies quickly grasped the political utility of the new religion as a means of maintaining chiefly control over the commoners. Thus the new Christian kings found themselves quite as much in need of the missionaries as the missionaries were of them.

The missionaries on Tahiti quickly took advantage of their new status by introducing a simple law code in 1819 partly based on one devised by their LMS brethren in southern Africa. It legitimized Pomare II as God's chosen servant, established the sabbath as a holy day, and promulgated rules based on custom, the Ten Commandments, and evangelical morality. The code was revised almost annually, with similar laws introduced on nearby islands, culminating in an 1824 constitution establishing a parliament of chiefs, a rudimentary tax system, and a judiciary. In 1839 the missionaries implemented a similar code in northern Tonga; however, following his conquest of Tonga, Taufa‘ahau enlarged his consultations from missionaries to beachcombers, ship captains, the governor of New Zealand, and lawyers in Australia. Law codes of 1850 and 1862 reflected Christian preoccupations but also imposed a new governance structure that firmly entrenched the king's power over the aristocracy and the land. A constitution appeared 1875, written

5 K. R. Howe, Where the Waves Fall: A New South Sea Islands History from First Settlement to Colonial Rule (Honolulu, 1984), p. 140.
mostly by the Wesleyan missionary Shirley Baker and based partly upon the Hawaiian constitution of 1840. Although Tonga became a British protectorate in the early twentieth century, the monarchy and the amended 1875 constitution endured.

Missionaries reached the zenith of their political influence in the newly formed kingdoms of Tahiti, Tonga, and Hawai’i, by far the most stratified of the Polynesian societies at the time of European contact. Their progress elsewhere in the region also rested heavily upon local elites, even when political structures militated against the creation of unified kingdoms. In Samoa chiefs were elected by local village and district councils, which they needed to consult on matters of governance and war. Samoa thus had a great number of local chiefs. An able and aggressive leader could accrue regional power by gaining any or all of the four most distinguished hereditary titles on the big islands of Upolu and Savai’i, but even so their authority was mostly ceremonial apart from leadership in war. Christianity spread quickly in the 1830s on a village-by-village basis. Missionaries introduced law codes but were frustrated by the tendency of local chiefs to interpret them in terms of local politics and their own ambitions. Despite repeated attempts by missionaries and intervening European powers to establish a kingdom, war between competing chiefs continued through much of the nineteenth century. A missionary kingdom also failed to form in Fiji, largely because of the enduring power of regional chiefs even after Cakobau’s victories and the subsequent rapid expansion of Christianity. In New Zealand, where chiefly power was even more localized and limited, Christianity spread much more gradually, mostly following the formal annexation of the country by Britain in 1840. Progress was even slower in the Melanesian islands to the west of Fiji, where extreme linguistic and political fragmentation meant that Christianity could not be imposed from above but had to be gradually accepted from below.

K. R. Howe argues convincingly that indigenous political structures combined with chiefly ambitions profoundly shaped the forms of Polynesian societies after European contact even if ‘outside influences far beyond the control of the kings and their subjects ultimately determined the fate of the royal regimes.’ The same, of course, was true in Africa, where powerful leaders also used their alliances with missions for political advantage. But there was a crucial difference. Few of the African elite accepted baptism and those that did, such as Khama of Botswana, did not trigger mass acceptance

7 Howe, Where the Waves Fall, p. 197.
of Christianity. Missionaries in Polynesia by the early 1820s faced the daunting challenge not simply of introducing Christianity but of consolidating its hold in the general population.

Missionaries and Converts

The first agents of British mission societies left for distant posts with little guidance on how they should teach the gospel or organize local congregations once they began to emerge. Only four of the thirty missionaries (plus five wives and three children) sent to Tahiti by the LMS in 1797 were ordained ministers. Later the sending churches required most missionaries to attend a seminary, but directors continued to insist that a simple faith and skills with one’s hands were the best preparation for work among the ‘savage’ folk of Africa and the Pacific. In the beginning, missionaries had to invent procedures and standards as they went along, a process that occasioned no end of squabbling. At first on their own initiative, but increasingly in response to directors, they reproduced in the mission fields attenuated versions of the familiar ecclesiastical structures from home, adding to them oversight and district committees as needed. Still, this left a lot of room for improvisation.

While individual proclivities and local conditions created tremendous variation, early African missions followed a markedly different path of development from those in the Pacific. In Africa most missionaries established settlements to which they recruited potential converts who lived apart from the larger population. The mission villages varied greatly in function, size, and relationship to the surrounding societies across the continent. In eastern Africa the largest mission settlements housed ex-slaves cut off from distant homelands. Many mission villages in southern Africa, in contrast, served local populations, offering refuge at times of war and the chance of employment and education at times of peace. Mission communities generally shared ‘the sense that this was a place in which the European mind rather than African custom controlled the details of life—patterns of work and marriage, the shape of houses, the public practice of religion’. In the early years settlements often appeared as the only practical way to introduce Christianity by combining the requirements of security with a concentration of resources and enhanced control over the residents. Over time, most missionaries would come to see the settlements as a liability, an impediment

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to the greater task of reaching the masses. By this point, ironically enough, Africans reared in the settlements had assumed the leading role in the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the colonial period.

The pattern of mission expansion in the Pacific islands was very different. While missions eventually established head stations with boarding schools, seminaries, medical posts, workshops, and sometimes plantations, these rarely achieved the size of even the smallest African mission communities. Almost all evangelistic outreach occurred in the villages where converts continued to live side-by-side with traditionalists. In part, the absence of autonomous mission communities was the result of the limited land base on most islands, but mostly it reflected the rapid growth of mass interest in Christian instruction. To meet the demand, missionaries necessarily relinquished considerable control in two areas: first, over the direct communication of the religion to islanders and, secondly, over the shaping of Christian teachings and values in their new cultural environment.

Allied chiefs and missionaires found mutual advantage in quickly training islander evangelists to promote Christianity. Pomare II, Tāufa‘ahau, Ka‘ahumanu, and other high chiefs saw islander teachers as a critical political tool to legitimize and expand their power base. While political stability was not unimportant to the missionaries, their more immediate concern was to prepare the population as quickly as possible for baptism—in their minds, literally to rescue them from eternal damnation. The scale of both the political and religious projects required the engagement of large numbers of islanders as teachers and deacons. This was especially the case in politically decentralized societies like Samoa and New Zealand, where each village insisted on having its own teacher and resisted outside control over church congregations. The eleven English missionaries who had settled in Samoa by 1839 found themselves supervising 138 teachers. Similar ratios obtained in New Zealand in the 1850s, where at least 800 mostly unpaid ‘native agents’ worked for the two Protestant missions. Even in the kingdoms, where people were familiar with centralized places of worship, the sheer numbers of islanders seeking instruction necessitated large numbers of teachers. In the early 1830s, for instance, the Hawai‘ian mission supported some 1,100 schools serving as many as 50,000 mostly adult students.

9 Howe, Where the Waves Fall, p. 241.
Islanders played a key role not just in consolidating Christianity within the new kingdoms but also in the opening of new mission fields. By the mid-1820s Tahitian converts had either deliberately or through accidental drift voyages taken the Word to the Cook Islands, Samoa, and distant Tonga. In 1822 an LMS delegation inspecting the Tahitian mission took nine converts to visit the newly established American Congregationalist mission in Hawai‘i. Impressed by the persuasive role the converts played in promoting Christianity, the delegation leaders upon their return urged the creation of a native seminary to harness local religious excitement and direct it to new fields. They found a willing agent in John Williams, who had already arranged to establish converts from his base on Raiatea, near Tahiti, in the Cook Islands to the east. Over the next seventeen years Williams would do more than anyone to facilitate the use of what became known as the ‘Native Agency’. After successfully settling teachers and their families in the Cooks and Samoa, Williams was clubbed to death on the beach of Erromanga in 1839 in the act of bringing Polynesian evangelists to the Melanesian islands.

The extensive employment of native ‘teachers’ (the term ‘missionary’ was reserved for whites) occasioned heated debates in the Pacific and Africa. Sceptics fretted that converts, only barely out of ‘heathenism’, would spread confusion or even heresy. Ignoring their own failings, they questioned whether the teachers possessed the strength of character to maintain moral discipline without missionary oversight. Still, the advantages greatly outweighed these hesitations. Teachers were far cheaper to employ than Europeans as they were expected to assume a native lifestyle requiring few supplies and small wages, if any. Islanders adjusted far more readily than whites to village lifestyles and customs, or so it was thought. In turn, the missionaries assumed that native peoples would respond more readily to evangelists who looked and acted much like themselves. Finally, although not openly acknowledged, the teachers’ lives were reckoned more expendable than those of whites. Many died martyrs to the cause, especially after the push into Melanesia. In the first twenty-six years of the LMS mission to New Guinea, at least 130 out of 250 Polynesian teachers died, mostly from malaria, along with an unknown number of their wives and children.12 The evangelization of Melanesia was built upon the graves of the Polynesian pioneers.

The eagerness of so many Polynesian converts to serve as evangelists, in even extremely dangerous situations, suggests that the appearance of the Native Agency cannot be adequately explained merely with reference to the machinations of chiefs and missionaries. One must also consider personal motivations: dreams of adventure, social advancement, influence, and the promise of salvation. At a most general level, however, the rapid growth of indigenous evangelism reflected the transition of Christianity from a foreign cult to an indigenous religious movement. Decades later a similar popular movement burst from the missions in Africa, where the 'sudden vast multiplication of... preachers and teachers had not been planned for or prepared for by missionaries. It had simply happened...'. In both places missionaries found themselves playing catch-up with a movement over which they exercised only limited control.

The emergence of the Native Agency profoundly affected social arrangements in both native societies and the mission organizations. A large number of islanders now worked, albeit at the bottom, as staff of ecclesial organizations that had no parallel in their own traditions. They voluntarily submitted to the authority of small missionary elites for training, placement, and supervision. Missionaries in turn became more distanced from direct evangelization of the masses as they assumed the ever-increasing burden of training and managing their large native staffs. All of the Pacific missions quickly set up seminaries, a few of which, like the Missionary Seminary on Maui (1831), Malua Institute in Samoa (1844), and Tupou College in Tonga (1866), won reputations for high academic standards and attracted many students. Once out of the door of the college, teachers often worked largely independently of mission supervision and support. While this could leave them vulnerable at the missionary frontier, their association with Europeans and God often proved a potent source of mana. Many assumed positions of great influence at home and even more so in some of the distant mission fields, such as Tuvalu, where they worked with little or no direct white supervision. Inevitably, the native pastorate came to resent their subservient position in the missions. During the 1870s Samoans forced the missionary elite on the LMS district council to cede significant authority to village deacons, many of whom were chiefs, and to ordain most teachers as pastors with the right to administer baptisms and the Eucharist.

13 Hastings, Church in Africa, p. 441.
Andrew Porter observes that wherever Christianity encountered indigenous societies in the British Empire, there occurred 'a constant process of mutual engagement and two-way translation'. The speed with which Christianity spread across the Pacific islands and the fact that islanders themselves were often its emissaries greatly limited the direct control white missionaries exercised over the ways the new religion was appropriated, absorbed, and redefined in local societies. Indeed, in many places the process of absorption began well before the appearance of missionaries, white or brown, as islanders encountered fragments of Christianity in the form of services conducted by naval captains, hymns sung by sailors, or rumours of the remarkable happenings in Tahiti. In the early years the appearance of the whites, in their great ships bearing awesome weapons, touched off intense speculation in the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Hawai‘i, recalling ancient prophecies telling of the arrival of stranger kings bringing cataclysmic change. Not surprisingly, many islanders at first assumed that the Christian god was the ultimate source of the white man’s mana, as displayed in his evident wealth and power. Deliberately encouraging this misconception, John Williams convinced the Samoan high chief Malietoa to accept teachers on his visits of 1830 and 1832. Not much convincing seems to have been required because by this time many Samoans had heard about missionary teachings from Tahitian visitors and during their own travels to Tahiti, Tonga, and elsewhere. One of these Samoan travellers, Siovili, gained a large cult following by prophesying the imminent return of the dead and immense prosperity for those who accepted the white man’s god. For years after they began working in Samoa, the LMS and Methodist missions competed not only with Siovili and each other, but also with numerous local movements led by sailors who had been recruited and sometimes kidnapped by villagers to provide them with religious instruction. A few of these ‘sailor cults’ provided reasonable approximations of orthodoxy; but in other instances ‘religious worship tended towards the use of a copybook as “Bible”, the singing of sea-shanty “hymns”, and the delivery of “sermons” in any language the preacher happened to know.’

Millenarian movements emerged in many parts of Polynesia at various times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it was only in places

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where chiefly power was relatively fragmented—Samoa, western Fiji, and especially New Zealand—that they proved more than ephemeral. Even where Christianity was installed as a national religion, the early stages of conversion reflected a popular sense of momentous change. In many places zealots smashed representations of the ancestral gods, desecrated temples, and openly defied the old taboos. Crowds crushed into makeshift churches to sing praises to the new god. Most notably, they demanded to be taught the mysteries of reading and writing. The missionaries struggled to keep up with the enormous demand for spellers, vernacular translations of Christian texts, and the teachers who could provide the training to use them. The missions invested much of their resources into the work of translation, printing, and distribution. In the first year of operation the Wesleyan printing press in Tonga produced a staggering 17,000 books in the vernacular.\(^\text{16}\) By 1845 the LMS printing press in Samoa had cranked out almost 8 million 'pages of useful reading matter', to which the Foreign and British Bible Society would soon add a Samoan New Testament and eventually the full Bible.\(^\text{17}\) It is likely that many heeded the missionaries’ contention that one’s individual salvation depended upon a personal engagement with the Gospels, but the texts exuded their own powerful magic. Adrian Hastings’s comment on a similar wave of enthusiasm that swept through parts of Africa in a later period is cogent: ‘What was so exhilarating about the Scriptures was that they were so comprehensively supernaturalist, so supportive of belief in spirits of various sorts, and yet so manifestly useful in secular terms.’\(^\text{18}\) Access to the Bible in the vernacular like nothing else allowed converts to engage with Christianity in their own terms. The village pastor’s sermon, blending biblical stories with moral and political exhortations into a powerful rhetorical whole, gave vivid presence to God’s mana.

Although a number of missionaries gained a deep knowledge and respect for Polynesian cultures, virtually all assumed that a full acceptance of Christianity entailed the complete rejection of the ‘heathenish’ past and adoption of a pious form of ‘civilization’ based upon British middle-class values. They engaged in a constant and often acrimonious debate over strategies for bringing this about, what local practices were compatible with Christianity, the expected pace of change, the standards for measuring the progress of

\(^{16}\) Howe, *Where the Waves Fall*, p. 188.


individual converts, and the treatment of those who felt short of the standards. In general, islanders were required to attend church and religious classes for a set period and to demonstrate a grasp of the essential points of the faith before receiving baptism, although in some places in the early years a mere expression of interest seems to have been enough. Baptized Christians, and to some extent the full population in the kingdoms, were presented with an ever-lengthening list of proscriptions centred on the observation of the sabbath and the regulation of moral behaviour. Miscreants and backsliders were punished by fines and sometimes beatings from the chiefs and the denial of church privileges by the missionaries. The degree of compliance waxed and waned in the mission fields, not least because the chiefs themselves ignored the rules against such things as polygyny and warfare when they became inconvenient; but in general Polynesians quickly reoriented their societies around Sunday worship and the church. While often exhilarated by the evidence of God's hand at work, the missionaries nevertheless remained sceptical that such conformance with mission rules reflected a true change of heart, the internalization of a sense of personal sin. This scepticism reached its most extreme expression in the Hawaiian mission, which so vigorously enforced its puritanical standards that after eighteen years with half the population attending church, only one congregant out of a hundred 'had been granted the privilege of communion with Christ'. It was also manifested in the reluctance in all of the mission fields to ordain islanders as full ministers.

The missionaries had good reasons for doubt. Even in the Polynesian kingdoms, older religious understandings survived, often in Christian guises. The state Christianity of the kingdoms assumed a familiar form with its own taboos, temple system, and requirements for 'sacrifice' through contributions of food, labour, and eventually money. In Hawai'i commoners continued to make sacrifices to local deities at small shrines well into the Christian era. Everywhere people still made sense of their lives within a cosmology that had expanded to include the Christian god and his emissaries but which still accepted as reality ancestral spirits, sacred areas, witchcraft, magic, ancient genealogies, and founding mythologies. The outward forms of Christianity might obscure the survival of indigenous religious sensibilities for a time, but it could not destroy them.

No other organization had as wide or as deep an impact on Pacific societies in the years before Empire, and long after in many areas, as the missions. The

19 Daws, Shoal of Time, p. 98.
cultural changes associated with Christianity affected the most intimate aspects of island societies: personal adornment, family organization, gender roles, leadership, orientations to time and space, and artistic production, to mention but a few. The missionaries imposed many prohibitions and set new standards of behaviour, but few if any would have been accepted without the active support first of the chiefs and later of islander evangelists who carried the mission regimens to more distant islands. The local forms of Christianity that emerged were hybrids combining Polynesian conceptions of hierarchy and spirituality with evangelical moralism. Visitors to Tonga in the latter decades of the nineteenth century were impressed (or dismayed) by commodious village churches, by the black-frocked native pastors exhorting their congregations during the long services to honour Jehovah and give generously to his mission, and by the melodious church choirs raising their voices to heaven. Greatly appreciated for their oratorical skills and for their educational achievements, pastors in places like Samoa and Tonga gradually occupied the spiritual centres of their communities. Local chiefs associated themselves with the pastor by serving as deacons and incorporating Christian prayers and other overt forms of the religion into their political activities. Congregations showered their pastors with lavish gifts, and the splendour of a pastor’s home, along with his girth, came to be associated with God’s blessing on the community as a whole. They had, in effect, taken ‘the place of the priests and prophets of [the old society] as mediators with the unseen world.’

The local churches, then, became key creative sites in the encounter between Western evangelical and indigenous cultures. The networks established by the missions as they expanded into new fields facilitated the diffusion of ideas, products, and practices between the islands. Some mission innovations proved remarkably population across the region. The baggy ‘Mother Hubbard’ dresses, for instance, initially introduced in Hawai‘i to preserve Christian women’s ‘modesty’, rapidly became the favoured costume for Pacific women anywhere they could afford the cloth. Polynesian missionaries travelling to Melanesia after 1870 introduced new crops, forms of mat-weaving, and even the hula dance in some places. More significantly, the form of the Christian social order they sought to establish drew largely on the example of the church in Samoa or Tonga, much to the frustration of the supervising missionaries. Like the Polynesians, the Melanesians in time would make Christianity into an indigenous religion.

Garrett, To Live among the Stars, p. 124.
Missionaries, Traders, and Settlers in the Field

One cannot begin to make sense of the complex relationships between missionaries and other whites beyond colonial frontiers without bearing firmly in mind that the missions were, first and foremost, religious institutions. At the simplest level, the core functions of even the larger mission settlements centred upon classrooms where the essentials of the faith were taught and churches in which the faithful demonstrated their submission to God. Of course, other European Christians shared their beliefs and performed their devotions before native peoples; but only missionaries made dissemination of the religion their specialized task. At a deeper level, the religious impulse behind the missions affected not only missionaries’ attitudes towards the ‘perishing heathen’ of the tropics but also towards their fellow countrymen both in the field and at home. Stripped to its essence, the missionary vocation rested upon a theological foundation of human similitude, belief that all humans—brown and white, female and male—were equally capable of redemption before God. The evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century had awakened a sense of eschatological urgency in the Nonconforming churches for all individuals to acknowledge their fallen natures and seek forgiveness from God. The missions were thus only one face of a religious movement that was largely concerned with moral reform and spiritual awakening at home. Harsh as missionary condemnations of indigenous cultures often were, they could be just as critical of their own failings and those of their fellow citizens. In the remarkable statistical tabulation of the religious condition of the world’s people that takes up much of William Carey’s evangelical manifesto of 1792, he saved his sharpest rebuke for the ‘fallen Christians’ of northern Europe.21

The assumption of human similitude at the core of the mission endeavour coexisted uneasily with the confident and often racist assumption, shared to varying degrees by almost all missionaries, of the superiority of the white ‘race’. In missionary writings and in the planning behind the more ambitious mission settlements, one can detect a concerted attempt to overcome the contradiction by remaking converts into idealized versions of rural Europeans. The visionaries who created model communities like Metlakatla in British Columbia or Livingstonia in Africa saw them not simply as efficient means to ‘civilize’ converts but as utopian communities that

21 William Carey, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens (Leicester, 1792).
simultaneously revealed the capability of non-Europeans to rise to Christian civilization and the moral failings of Europe itself. David Livingstone's famous equation of 'Christianity, Commerce and Civilization' was as much a moral rebuke of Europe as an expression of confidence in its innate superiority. All of these endeavours and fine sentiments would flounder on the missionaries' inability to convince even themselves that Pacific islanders and Africans could be their equals.

While often among the earliest Europeans to settle among indigenous groups, missionaries were rarely the first to visit or the last to remain. Following the entry of the Spanish into the region in the sixteenth century, Pacific islanders were visited by a succession of temporary visitors from naval expeditions and vessels pursuing whales, sandalwood, and bêche-de-mer. By 1800 deserters from visiting ships, castaways, and escapees from the Australian penal colony had begun to haunt the beaches, many to die from violence and drink, but others to stay as clients of chiefs. Small port settlements soon appeared in places like the Bay of Islands, Apia, and Honolulu to provision visiting ships and to participate in commodity exchanges between Polynesians and European commercial interests. While settlers remained small in number and concentrated in a few places, after the mid-century they began rapidly to acquire large tracts of land from indebted chiefs in Hawai‘i, Samoa, and Fiji.

Relationships between missionaries and other whites beyond imperial authority were marked by considerable ambivalence. Missions depended on ships for transportation, mail, and provisions. They appreciated visits from naval captains both for companionship and for the aura of security lent by an association with Europe's military might. Above all, they made use of visiting ships to facilitate the trade of local products for commodities valued by the islanders as a means of winning favour from the chiefs and assuring their survival. Mission dependence on global networks of trade and military force grew and intensified. For their part, many naval captains appreciated the presence of missionaries as forces for good governance in the islands. Traders and settlers alike sought out missionaries for advice, companionship, medical care, aid in negotiations with chiefs, and as business partners.

Still the missionaries' desire to raise islanders to 'moral and useful lives' inevitably clashed with the desire of most other Europeans to find pleasure and profit in islander bodies and resources. The various codes developed by missionaries and their chiefly allies had as much to do with shielding native populations from the barbarism of whites as with leading them into 'civilization'. Ships' crews greatly resented Blue laws against
public drunkenness and prostitution. In 1826 randy sailors rioted in Honolulu against restrictions on prostitution. Hiram Bingham narrowly avoided being clubbed in the mêlée. As the century progressed, the stock figure of the ‘evil white man’, whose debaucheries destroyed the moral fibre and body of ‘innocent’ natives, rivalled the witch doctor and sorcerer in mission publications as the enemy of Christian progress. For the most part, missionaries quietly if unhappily tolerated the excesses they witnessed, but on occasion some publicly protested in the colonial and metropolitan presses. Missionary correspondents employed the rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement to denounce passionately the often unsavoury methods—especially kidnapping—used to recruit Melanesian labourers for the Queensland sugar plantations in the 1880s. While they failed to end labour recruiting, their protests led to imperial interventions: reforms, better policing, and eventually a protectorate over the Solomon Islands.

The frustration felt by a sailor thwarted from easy sex was keen but temporary. Those who settled in the islands to make their fortune nurtured larger grievances against missionary ‘interference’, especially when it threatened their own profits. They tended to rephrase their protest into two kinds of complaint: that missionaries were hypocrites lining their own pockets while pretending to minister to the native soul; and that mission education ‘ruined’ the natives, either by draining all of the joy out of their lives or by encouraging the presumption that they were the equal of the white man. Neither complaint can be taken at face value, but neither should they be entirely dismissed. Missions were in part commercial enterprises. The home churches were sparing in their subsidies, forcing local missionaries to develop ways to raise funds for their own upkeep and the expansion to new fields. Beyond this, evangelicals regarded the responsible pursuit of business as a moral good, part of a bundle of cultural values they hoped to instil in their converts. All the same, the scope for missions to develop as business enterprises in their own right was very limited. The daily burden of preaching, teaching, administration, and simple survival left little time for commerce. Those individuals who demonstrated a skill for profitable initiatives were subject to restrictions laid down by society directors and, even more so, the withering criticisms of other missionaries. In the Pacific, as in most places, missionaries who developed a taste for business soon tended to give up their religious vocation.

The question of whether missions made converts more or less compliant to the settler demands, while fiercely debated, must remain a matter of
conjecture. There can be little doubt, however, that the widespread acceptance of Christianity had important economic consequences. The missions served to cultivate tastes for certain European products while discouraging others, and they also served to encourage islanders to take up paid labour—when available—but never on a Sunday and much more by men than women, who became increasingly identified with the ‘traditional’ sphere of life. As Christianity expanded and consolidated, church members provided labour and money towards the building of hundreds of churches and the support of their pastors and own missionaries. In the 1820s the annual May meetings of the LMS in Tahiti became the occasion for Bible dramas, hymnsinging, and feasts. The festivals, which became fixtures in most of the Pacific islands, climaxed with a competition in which leading men demonstrated their mana through a public competition of gift-giving. During the 1860s Shirley Baker, the energetic chairman of the Methodist mission in Tonga, made the ceremony staggeringly profitable by increasing both the occasions for gift-giving and the amount by opening lines of credit against promised deliveries of palm oil. Within a decade the contributions from Tonga had grown so enormous they were effectively subsidizing the Australian Church.

The English travellers G. H. Kingsley and the Earl of Pembroke, passing through Tonga in 1871, denounced Baker’s system as ‘pure pillage’, commenting further that ‘the common name of their missionary schooner, “the Palm Oil Trader”, is according to their own account, well deserved’. This complaint, like those of settlers, glossed over the fact that islanders were neither just dupes nor victims but agents in their own right with their own motivations and agendas. The chiefs who enforced laws against prostitution in Hawai‘i were driven not just by piety but also by a desire to assert control over commoners. The rulers of Hawai‘i and Tonga made use of missionary advisers to devise constitutions not only as an acknowledgement of Jehovah but as a means of defending the sovereignty of their kingdoms in the face of a rapidly increasing presence of European commercial interests, backed by the occasional visit of a nation’s warship. Islanders, of course, had entered into commercial arrangements with various traders and settlers in the first place. They were quite capable of ignoring or turning on missionaries when it served their purposes. Thus Tāufa‘ahau was led to proclaim the secessionist Free Church of Tonga in 1885 when the Australian board failed to cede control over the Methodist missions. Christianity remained central to the

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evolving cultures of Tonga, Hawai‘i, and elsewhere, but as the presence of other Europeans increased, the influence of missionaries steadily waned.

In the final analysis, there was no clear line between missionaries and other whites in the Pacific or in Africa. Many missionaries in the Polynesian kingdoms came to enjoy very comfortable lifestyles, with staffs of servants tending commodious houses and gardens. While most eventually returned home or settled in white colonies, others stayed, forming large families and using their local connections to advance their personal fortunes. During his furlough in England in the 1830s, John Williams promoted a plan to carry on commercial trading alongside his mission work. After his death, his son settled as a trader and American consul in Samoa. They were by no means the only ones to make such a transition. Most infamously, several descendants of the American Congregational missionaries to Hawai‘i became major landowners who in 1893 helped to overthrow the Christian kingdom their predecessors had laboured to create.

Until the 1870s and 1880s missionaries were more or less ‘content to live as guests’ of local rulers. Few anticipated the expansion of imperial powers, ‘although at times they undoubtedly hoped for some sort of backing from Britain to assist and even protect them in difficulty’. In the Pacific missionaries joined calls for a more visible British presence in the form of warships and consuls as traders, sailors, and settlers threatened political stability—and as Roman Catholic missionaries proved a prelude to French colonization. The declaration of a French protectorate over Tahiti in 1843 came as a particularly heavy blow to the LMS, which was expelled from the islands a decade later. All the same, prior to the years of the ‘Scramble’, missionaries rarely appealed to Britain to assume power over a kingdom or region. Once the race to acquire colonial territories began, however, few objected. Their main concerns, beyond a preference for a British takeover, had to do with the protection of the land rights of indigenous populations and non-interference with missionary work. In the mid-1870s the LMS missionary John Mackenzie had petitioned for a protectorate over Bechuanaland, arguing ‘that nothing else could save Africans from white settler rapacity’. When it appeared that Queensland might move to annex eastern New Guinea, James Chalmers urged Britain to step in to prevent a repetition of the tragic fate of the

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24 Hastings, Church in Africa, p. 408.
25 Ibid., p. 409.
Aborigines. Only a protectorate would do, in which land sales were severely restricted and handled by the government, white settlement discouraged, and labour recruitment for Queensland banned outright.

The Great Powers made liberal use of the rhetoric of Christian benevolence to justify their acquisition of massive colonial empires in the late nineteenth century. Protection of missionaries provided a convenient pretence for French intervention in Hawai‘i and Tahiti, and, to a lesser extent, for the British in parts of East Africa. When imperial representatives proclaimed a protectorate or colony, missionaries could prove useful as translators and intermediaries with the local elite. On top of this, the Christian lobby at home contributed as many or more words to public discussions of imperialism as any faction. In the final analysis, however, missionaries possessed very limited political clout. They were not an arm of the State and their work in places like Tahiti or Uganda did not in itself establish British claims or interests. In the aftermath of the Scramble, British missionaries found themselves in German and American territories as well as the British Empire. They hoped that the imposition of imperial power would put an end to incessant fighting between local chiefs in places like Samoa and halt the Arabian slave trade in eastern Africa. They hoped that areas that had been closed to them because of warfare or resistance to their presence from rulers would now be thrown open to evangelization. They hoped that all of this could be accomplished with little confrontation and loss of life. Above all, they hoped—and largely believed—that the expansion of Empire was a matter of Providence and thus mostly benevolent. If indigenous people were to lose their autonomy, at least for a time, it was in order to save them from a dark past and bitter present, for a better and brighter future. Such hopes would be severely tested in the years ahead.

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