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Yannick Fer

Polynesian Protestantism, from the Local Church to Evangelical Networks

On a Sunday evening in August 2009, some sixty people are gathered together for a video evening, at the invitation of the Assembly of God in Moorea (French Polynesia), a small Pentecostal church established a few minutes away from the beltway, in the Pao Pao Valley. They are watching a sermon by a Brazilian Pastor, Moïse da Silva that was recorded during his time in an African church in the suburbs of Paris, entitled “The God of the Impossible.” It tells the story of how a young delinquent who was left for dead with five bullets in his body became an evangelist whose testimony has been spread worldwide.¹

This quite ordinary episode in the life of a local church testifies to the increasing telescoping of the observational scale of Christianity within Oceania. For a long time, anthropologists only encountered Christian churches in the course of field research that was focused principally on the most “traditional” aspects of Pacific cultures from a patrimonial perspective (Barker 1990, 9). When Christianity gradually established itself as an object of legitimate study in the 1980s, it was described through ethnographic studies carried out in these same regions, within small-scale cultural groups and relatively remote villages. Flows connecting rural and urban areas appeared, in an incidental way, as one of the factors that have contributed to the spread of new beliefs—in particular Pentecostal and charismatic currents. Analysis of the terms of the dialogue between local cultures and different expressions of Christianity also opened up broader perspectives, thus adding to an understanding of the processes of religious globalization (Robbins 2004). But the same places continued to be studied, and observation of the transformations of the religious landscape has rarely involved urban areas or the regional and international networks with which local forms of Christianity have decisive exchanges.

1. The field data that this article draws upon, and especially the newest data, comes principally from research undertaken between June and October 2009 in the Cook Islands and in French Polynesia, as part of the young researcher project MYSTOU, “Un mysticisme pour tous. Conceptions de l’individu et conditions d’implantation des protestantismes évangéliques: Europe, Maghreb, Arctique, Océanie,” supported and financed by the National Research Agency [l’Agence nationale de la recherche/ANR] (no ANR-08-JCJC-0060-01), led by Christophe Pons (IDEMEC).

At first glance, the dramatic progression of evangelical Protestantism in the region (Ernst 2006) seems at present to be forcing Oceania into the era of “religion without culture” predicted by Olivier Roy, characterized by a disconnection between Christianity and cultures and by a one-way deterritorialization of religious affiliations (Roy 2009). This is in striking contrast to historical Protestantism, the successor to nineteenth-century missions, which is anchored in local cultures to the point that it is now one of the custodians of traditional Polynesian identity. However, this overly simple opposition between cultural rootedness and evangelical globalization is misleading. The breaking through of these new forms of Christianity, of this “network culture” that brings ordinary believers a multitude of resources—via video, religious literature, or the Internet (Mary 2000, 12)—and places them in an “archipelago of churches and evangelical institutions, spread over the globe” (Fath 2002, 154), calls first for a revisiting of the role played by regional flows in the history of Pacific Protestantism and the elaboration of its contemporary discourse on tradition. A careful analysis of organizations in Oceania that move within the orbit of the international evangelical network Youth With A Mission (YWAM) and their religious resonance in various areas within Oceania will allow the differentiated effects that this type of Christianity may have at the level of relationships between individuals, cultures, and territories to be clarified. Through a combination of local ethnography, the observation of regional networks, and current transformations in global Protestantism, this analysis also aims to sketch out the ways in which the anthropology of Christianity in Oceania might be provided with a way of “enlarging its ‘field’ to include a space for the flows of and interactions between its research subjects” (Mary 2000, 122).

Christianity, Globalization, and Regional Movements

Religious changes in Oceania mainly occur at the intersection of intergenerational relationships and social and geographic mobility. Internal migration—from islands and rural villages to the cities—is contributing to the emergence of modes of urban life that are less constrained by the traditional structures of social control, and favors a rapid pluralization of Pacific Christianity. On remote islands and in the most isolated regions, missionary work is largely based on the in-between position of emigrant converts, who continue to be inserted in a latent fashion in local networks of kinship and solidarity, in spite of having achieved relative freedom. Through this, and in a low-key fashion, home-based meetings lay the ground for the establishment of new churches.

Oceania has the highest level of international migrants in the world, who are concentrated in Australia and New Zealand (United Nations 2006). In these countries, the Pacific peoples, as a result of the Polynesian migrations that took place after the Second World War, represent 6.9 % of the total population and constitute the main militant force within Christian churches. The links that

these overseas Polynesian communities—mainly Samoans, Tongans, or Cook Islanders—maintain with their islands of origin have created transnational spaces that are structured by constant flows and reciprocal influences (Levitt 2003). Integrated into multicultural societies where secularization of the dominant (Western) culture goes hand in hand with a great religious diversity, they simultaneously contribute to the building of these “rainbow” nations and the transformation of the Polynesian islands, with the fact that their demographic weight is often equivalent to (in the case of Tonga or Samoa) or sometimes greater than (in the case of the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau) the inhabitants of their country of origin making them leading economic, political, and religious actors.

On a smaller scale, horizontal flows between the Pacific islands have fed the propagation of new beliefs in the region for several decades.² Work-based migration towards the nickel mines of New Caledonia also facilitated the establishment of North American Pentecostalism in Tahiti and Vanuatu (New Hebrides) at the end of the 1970s (Fer 2005, 50, 128 and following). On Rarotonga (the main Cook Island), the rise of the tourist industry now attracts dozens of Fijian workers who swell the ranks of the local Pentecostal Churches.

The third wave of Pacific Christianity, made up of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, is the one that benefits most visibly from these migratory flows and the facilities provided by the parallel development of means of transport and communication. Even more than the professing churches from the second wave—the Adventists and the Mormons—these churches seem to be a “religious ‘movement’ accompanying and facilitating the movement of people,” (Martin 2002, 23) most notably through a discourse of necessary self-affirmation and the positive value of change, envisaged as progress. The rupture that this discourse caused to the most traditional forms of religious socialization (which in contrast placed emphasis on the perpetuation of religious-cultural heritages and the primacy of the community over the individual) generated over the course of the 1990s a series of microconflicts in the small islands or in Samoan villages dominated by the alliance of traditional leaders and historic church groups (Fer 2011, 464–465).³ The proliferation of parallel church groups and the dispersion of religious affiliations primarily affect family unity, even if the constant increase in the number of religiously mixed couples also tends to relativize denominational divisions

2. From the 1920s–1930s onwards, the first American Pentecostal missions established on Fiji reached out to workers who had come from the Solomon Islands, Samoa and Tonga, who contributed to the spread of Pentecostalism on their islands of origin (Larson 1997, 37).

3. The Samoan pastor F. Liua’ana, for example, asserted in 1994 (stating something that is reiterated regularly by the leaders of his church), that the Congregational Christian Church in Samoa (CCCS) “does not meet the needs of individuals because its priority is to meet the needs of the community. The concept of ‘individualism’ is foreign to Samoans. ‘Individualism’ (a central mentality within NRGs [new religious groups]) is selfishness in the Samoan mentality. ... The CCCS deals with the individuals’ needs, through the community to which they belong.” (Liua’ana 1994, 79).

in favor of a generic Christian identity. Moreover, a number of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches find in the invocation of the missionary history of Oceania, of which they see themselves as upholders, a way of symbolically counterbalancing the weakening of religious affiliations that their own progress has resulted in. Their historic affiliation to revivalist Protestantism in fact encourages them to follow in the footsteps not only of the Western missions of the nineteenth century, greatly inspired by the Methodist reawakening in Great Britain (Zorn 1993, 28 and following)—but also and above all, in those of the Polynesian teachers, missionaries and pastors who up until the 1980s contributed to the establishment of the historical Protestant churches in the islands of Oceania.

An overly systematic assimilation of Christianity into Western colonization has generally meant that this essential element of Pacific Christianity has gone undetected. One of the repercussions of this dimension in the era following political independence (gained between 1962 and 1980) was the project of constructing a Pacific Way: a regional fraternity gathering the “island peoples” that would go beyond their national particularities. In the nineteenth century, the recruitment of the first island Protestant converts to the service of the London Missionary Society (LMS, established in Tahiti from 1797 onwards) and then the mobilization of the Cook Islanders and Samoans reached by this missionary enterprise set in motion cultural exchanges between the Polynesian Islands, Micronesia, and Melanesia. While the Puritan American-Hawaiian missionaries turned to the Micronesian populations, at the end of the century, Methodists trained in Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa joined the Polynesian staff of LMS in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, the last frontier of the regionalization of Protestantism (Breward 2001; Forman 1990; Garrett 1982). These missionary movements established Christianity, in its Protestant or Catholic version, as a patrimony common to the peoples of Oceania, and made a strong vector of interdependence between geographically dispersed islands.⁴ Polynesian musical styles—transmitted through Christian songs—as well as new plants, farming methods, building techniques, and sports practices, found a place in the cultural habits of the converted Melanesian populations (Latufeku 1996).

Turaliare Teauriki, the president of the Cook Islands Christian Church (The Cook Islands’ historical Protestant church) in the early 1980s, was also one of the last of historical Protestantism’s Polynesian missionaries in Papua New Guinea, between 1963 and 1975. In his autobiography, he describes intra-Pacific relationships that are not exempt from the cultural misunderstandings and prejudices associated with relationships of domination between Polynesian missionaries and local populations. However, he concludes by evoking the durable links that now unite the members of the Papua Ekalesia to his church:

4. Catholic missions also spread during the course of the nineteenth century, spurred on by the Picpus congregation in the eastern part of Oceania and the Fathers of the Society of Mary [Marists] in the western part (Girard 2008).

We have been happy to find that many Papuans whose ancestors received the early Cook Island missionaries, are interested in keeping a connection with our Church. In 1982, about 50 of them came in a group to visit Rarotonga. In 1984, 147 came. Now they will send 147 again in December 1985. Each time they stay two weeks as the guests of our Church. So we have not lost contact with the land we loved. (Teauriki 1996, 272–273)

The association of historical Anglican and Protestant Pacific Churches within the Pacific Conference of Churches (the PCC, founded in 1966) provided an institutional foundation for this regional identity. Furthermore, through the emergence of the Pacific Theological College (PTC) that opened the following year in Suva (Fiji), it has promoted new contextual theologies that place emphasis on a cultural reappropriation of the Biblical message.⁵ Several Protestant pastors trained at this college have in the course of the last few decades been agents of the spreading of theologies of the coconut, land, and culture to their churches' believers, who are often reticent when faced with this "new tradition." (Malogne-Fer 2007, 448–452) This militant rerooting of Christianity within Pacific cultures therefore conveys at one and the same time a rejection of Western domination and the increasing integration of Protestant groups that have been emancipated from the tutelage of European missions in regional networks (the PCC) and international ones (the World Council of Churches and CEVAA), having joined with and supported demands for religious decolonization (Forman 1984, 170–171).⁶

Globalization driven by evangelical movements does not simply produce a delocalization of religious identities that breaks with a historic process of cultural rootedness, but also produces a reconfiguration of the links between local Christianity and the regional and international networks that influence its evolution.

Churches and Evangelical Networks

Classic Pentecostalism of North American origin, whose main representatives in Oceania are the assemblies of God, constructed a network of regional relationships from the earliest days of their establishment (from the 1920s–1930s in Fiji), which were formalized over the course of the 1960s through an annual conference of the Anglophone assemblies of God in the Pacific: in 1966, delegates from Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Guam, the Marshall Islands, New Zealand, and Hawaii met (Larson 1997, 110). Applying a cascade strategy to missionary work—giving new churches the task of reaching out to islands to which they were linked

5. See the article by Gilles Vidal.

6. CEVAA is a "community of mission Churches" bringing together thirty-seven Churches linked to Protestant, Francophone missionary work, mainly in Europe (France, Switzerland), and in Africa. Notably, it was behind a conference organized in July 2000 in Lifou (New Caledonia) on the theme of "theology of the earth in the Pacific churches."

by geographical proximity or migratory fluxes—and the rapid recruitment of indigenous pastors contributed to the rapid embedding of this particular form of Pentecostalism in Oceania. Today it coexists in many places with Charismatic churches of local origin, such as the Tokaikolo Christian Fellowship, founded in 1978 by a Tongan Methodist pastor, and with regional denominations born out of the expansion of Australian and New Zealand churches.

This rapid diversification of evangelical Protestantism has produced an interplay between networks and local, regional and international dynamics, of which the churches are only the most visible part. The emergence of a religious field in its own right, offering believers both a variety of options and a set of common references, actually encourages the flow of individuals and the creation of informal groups that are halfway between the church institution and the traditional practices of family piety. Forms of religious socialization in the Pentecostal/Charismatic milieu center on the subjective experience of a “personal relationship” with God (Fer 2007) and the existence of evangelical currents at the heart of the historical Protestant churches further accentuate this dissemination, which is given a transnational dimension through migration.

Youth missionary organizations that appeared after the Second World War within North American evangelicalism have especially contributed to amplifying this twofold rhythm of creation of networks and dispersion in Oceania. During the 1980s Youth for Christ (YFC, which has been present in New Zealand since 1947), and Youth With A Mission (YWAM, established in the region at the end of the 1960s), established partnerships with a number of historic Pacific Island Protestant churches, proposing to fight against the “Mormon peril” and to check youth disaffection with traditional Protestantism. In April 1984, in a letter to the general secretary of the Protestant Church in French Polynesia, an international director of YWAM mentioned the favorable response received in Tonga and Samoa, countries where Mormonism had made strong inroads.⁷

I just returned from Tonga where I personally met with the King and also church leaders as they are also concerned about the Mormon activity in Tonga. The King was very excited about our ministry and is supporting it at 100 %.... Also, I was able to meet with the Protestant minister of Western Samoa and his brother who is head of the Christian Church of American Samoa plus many key leaders of these two nations. As you know, they just completed a Mormon temple there also and it is a major threat to the Christian Church.⁸

With Oceania having a population that is among the youngest in the world (with the proportion of those under fifteen varying from 32.1% in Micronesia

7. The official census for 1986 in Tonga revealed that 12.2% of the total population was Mormon. The proportion was 10.2% in Western Samoa at the time of the 1991 census and 12.5% in American Samoa in 1995.

8. Letter dated April 26, 1984, sent by Tom Bauer, director of YWAM training schools (DTS Schools) to Mr. John Doom, general secretary of the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia [EPPF] (Archives of the EPPF).

to 39.4% in Melanesia), the generational issue was also likely to convince Protestant leaders.⁹ But the influence of these missionary organizations led to a greater likelihood of the faith's most committed young people being converted to a Charismatic, evangelical creed. It also contributed to a scattering of affiliations through building bridges with Pentecostal churches (Aliimalemanu 1999; Fer 2009) and through the relativization of institutional frontiers in favor of a "generic" Protestantism that is in tune with new international networks. Both on the islands and in communities of Polynesian migrants—notably the Pacific peoples of New Zealand, who played a key role in the expansion of these youth missionary organizations—young Protestants saw in all this the possibility of escaping from the tutelage of church hierarchies and the shackles imposed by the missionary legacy, through a freeing of their ability to express themselves (notably through music), and an individualizing discourse ("God has a plan for your life") that echoed the transformations affecting the social destiny of that generation. In a context of the growing (social and geographical) mobility associated with a higher general level of education and the decline of the family-based subsistence economy, these organizations seemed in fact to offer the resources needed for a change that was seen as a necessary progress, through the acquisition of a "deeper" understanding of the Bible (through the prism of the Charismatic experience) and entry into the cosmopolitan universe of global evangelism.

From the 1980s onwards, Youth With A Mission has distinguished itself from the other networks of youth missionaries through combining this cosmopolitanism with a militant reappropriation of cultural expressions that were traditionally banned in the Protestant Pacific Churches—dance in particular—and by combining this cultural militancy with a specific conception of relationships between individuals and territories, inspired by the theology of spiritual warfare. The way in which these types of religious actors have gone beyond both the frontiers of the "local" and those of the churches and deliberately organized the spread of their missionary action through a multitude of "ministers" and "friend" networks has usually placed them out of view of anthropological observation. But now the influence their strategy has had on social representations and the construction of identities is significant enough to reveal the political repercussions it might have in the near future. Therefore by making indigenous cultures one of the elements of self-affirmation (the right for each individual to be "themselves") while also placing them in a divine and natural order (Genesis as a source of identity of people and their essential link to territory), YWAM lays down the bases of new forms of engagement that combine religious individualism, cultural mobilizations, and political militancy. Analysis of the Island Breeze movement (a branch of YWAM that defends the rehabilitation of Pacific cultures as expressions of Christian faith) and the effects of the spread of a theology of spiritual warfare in Oceania (to which YWAM actively contributed) will clarify

9. Estimates made in 2005 by the United Nations.

this connection between individualization, globalization, and reterritorialization of the religious imaginary.

Island Breeze and the “New Birth” of Polynesian Cultures

Youth With A Mission was born in 1960 at the heart of Californian multiculturalism. Its founder Loren Cunningham was also the youth pastor for the assemblies of God, in charge of the district of Los Angeles. Interviewed in 2005 about his conception of YWAM’s cultural diversity, he referred first of all to the California of the 1960s:

When we lived in Los Angeles, on my street, there were Hispanic... , we had Jewish, we had Chinese, we had Japanese, one of my best friends was black, you know.... So that I didn’t think of ethnicity as being a major problem, I saw that as part of an exciting and more fulfilling life.¹⁰

However, at this time, California was still predominantly white, just like the American assemblies of God,¹¹ which, in the early twentieth century, emerged from a white Pentecostalism that was reticent when it came to the—dramatic and unprecedented—interracial fraternization experienced during the fervor of the early days of the Charismatic awakening in the church of black pastor William J. Seymour (Cox 1995, 60; Blumhofer 1993, 117).¹²

Cunningham’s project involved mobilizing “waves of young people” in the service of a planetary adventure: the propagation of the evangelical creed in an ideological context dominated by the tensions of the Cold War. It also both marked a generational rupture with classical forms of institutional constraint and missionary activity and updated providential American messianism: this “conviction that free, Christian America would be the carrier of a specific prophetic, ‘messianic’ mission,” which can also be found expressed in the same era by the evangelist Billy Graham (Fath 2002, 117).¹³ In accordance with the traditionally dominant ideology within Protestant evangelism, the liberation of individual souls by way of a personal choice to convert—conceived of here as the condition for geopolitical transformation (the victory of the “free worlds” over atheism and Communism)—entailed, in Cunningham’s eyes, passing beyond identities and cultural frontiers—that is, those “‘systems’ that separate us” in spite of the fact that fundamentally “people are people everywhere” (Cunningham 1985, 41). However, the particular configuration of the relationships between historic

10. Interview with Loren Cunningham, May 6, 2005, on Kona, Big Island, Hawaii.

11. In 2000, a report set up by the assemblies of God on the occasion of their annual congress showed a proportion of 64% whites among the members of these churches (18.6% were Hispanics and 7.8% black).

12. The Baptist preacher William J. Seymour opened a Church at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, which later became a legendary place in the birth of Pentecostalism.

13. After being one of the first team members of Youth For Christ, in 1950, Billy Graham founded his own missionary organization, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Protestantism and Polynesian cultures inspired in the early 1980s a reversal of perspective that appeared to be unprecedented, in the form of bringing about a “return” to the culture as one of the paradigmatic expressions of evangelical personal choice. This reversal was made possible (and amplified) by the underlying breakdown of the links between institutions, beliefs, and practices that was produced by the increasing self-determination of the younger generations in respect of traditional religious and community authority structures, in particular with regard to migration.

The Island Breeze movement, an official member of Youth With A Mission’s network of “ministries” (activity programs), was started by the Samoan Sosene Le’au and a group of a dozen young students, at a school of evangelism that he was head of on YWAM’s campus in Kona, Big Island, Hawaii, in 1979. What the majority of the students, all Polynesian—with the exception of one New Zealander of South American origin—had in common was having broken, through their conversion to Pentecostalism, with a family heritage anchored in Protestant tradition. Originally from Ta’u, a small island in the east of American Samoa, Le’au had also grown up in the Congregational Christian Church (a church that came out of the London Missionary Society). He remained there up to his departure in 1971 for college in Pago Pago (the capital), though he was converted to evangelical Protestantism that same year following meetings organized in the village by missionaries from the Samoan diaspora in the United States. In Pago Pago, a second conversion, this time to assemblies of God Pentecostalism, led him a few years later into a religious universe in which the rupture with “ordinary” cultural practices tends to be read as one of the signs of true conversion, since the acquisition of Western ways of being is implicitly associated with the hope of social elevation and access to the wider world. According to Le’au:

I never heard it said from the pulpit in so many words, “Your heritage is evil,” and yet the message was conveyed in a variety of different ways.... I was trying desperately to be “Westernized,” while at the same time, holding on to my heritage. (Le’au, 1997, 47–48)

The tradition embodied today by the Protestant churches in Polynesia is historically based on two pillars. First, the translation of the Bible into local languages established for the Protestant churches the role of protecting the indigenous languages, and, by extension, their cultures, against Western domination. But despite the efforts made since the 1960s by Pacific theologians, this religious construction of Polynesian identities also still implies, in most of these churches, a sacred/profane distinction inherited from Western missions, which banned forms of expression like dance and drums from the temple. Nevertheless, parish dance groups have brought together many young Polynesians and in many places have contributed to these young generations’ reappropriation of a Polynesian cultural pride (Brami 2000).

The second pillar of this Protestant tradition involves, particularly in Samoa (Tcherkézoff 1997, 338 and following), an overlapping of church and community

hierarchies that subjects young Polynesians to the authority of elders, in the form of both deacons and heads of households. The challenge to prohibiting cultural expressions, which are also the privileged expressions of an age group and a social phase of freedom and lack of responsibility (*taure'are'a* in Tahitian), does not merely express the search for an identity; it also expresses above all the desire for freedom from the traditional relationships of domination between generations and between individuals and church authority. Freed from this domination by their adherence to Pentecostalism, which at the same time distanced them from the main forum for the transmission of cultural memory and Polynesian Christianity, the students who rallied around Le'au in 1979 spontaneously took up, during "praise" time, the dances and movements that in their eyes expressed the recovery of an individual liberty, thereby escaping from the alternative imposed by traditional Protestantism and classic Pentecostalism. By making use of these Polynesian dances during the missionary trip that followed their training period, which took place against the backdrop of the 1979 South Pacific Games in Fiji, they were able to measure the impact that all this could have on young Pacific Protestants. Reunited after this first Fijian experience back in Samoa, where Le'au was now national director of YWAM, the group also worked on the elaboration of a program of dances for use in missionary work with the aid of "cultural professionals," that is to say entrepreneurs with an interest in staging shows based on local cultures for tourists. In 1980 the first tour to New Zealand took place, where Island Breeze's dances encountered some considerable success among young Pacific peoples and Maoris from Protestant faiths.

This reformulation of Polynesian cultures within evangelical space has therefore gone down the path of a "folklorization," understood as a process of rearranging elements that are fragmented, scattered away from tradition, and outside of the approval of the institutions that act as guardians of memory (Maigret 2000, 519–521). It has been experienced as a form of individual liberty by young Polynesians who, having "left" their culture, returned to it through a personal choice that is comparable to that of "internal converts" (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 124 and following). The theoretical coherency of this often very personal exercise of rearranging cultural identities within evangelism has been provided by the ambiguous notion of the "redemption of cultures;" a notion popularized by the American missionary Don Richardson (Richardson 1981) and largely propagated by YWAM. What missionary pragmatism identified as fruitful "connections" between local cultural elements and the Biblical message has become "scientific" proof of a "buried Christianity"—signs of the "forgotten" presence of the Christian God in the cultural memory of peoples who were nonetheless historically outside of Christianity. This perspective allows evangelical converts to reinstate a "true" cultural identity, which is to say a Christian one. It therefore encourages a critical reappropriation of what was a matter of course when they were just the "natural" agents of this culture, in tension between a basic desire to formally rehabilitate cultural expressions that were rejected by classic

Pentecostalism and the more militant enterprises that contributed to the emergence of indigenous Charismatic versions of Protestantism.

Island Breeze's dances themselves are situated at the intersection of three worlds: a familiarity with the symbolic language of Polynesian dances gained through the youth associations' (and in particular parish groups') popularization of them; the codes of tourist spectacles, which amount to a sort of universal vocabulary of cultural authenticity (Maoris dancing the haka, Hawaiians the hula, Tahitians the tamure, and so forth); and finally the world of "Christian dance" (Inoue 2003, 208 and following), which revises older practices by introducing conservative Christian moral norms into them, for example through the use of skirts below the knee, restrained sensuality, and Biblically inspired lyrics.

Variable-Geometry Identities

On the Polynesian islands, Island Breeze's dances have encouraged young Protestants to turn traditional hierarchies upside down, by placing themselves on those hierarchies' own terrain—the defense of cultural tradition—in a bid to claim the right to define the relationships between Christianity and culture for themselves. They have also been taken up by the Charismatic currents close to YWAM, who have combined them with the same radical liberalism, freedom of cultural expression, and free experimenting with the "work of the Holy Spirit" and opposed them to the authoritarian rigor of classic Pentecostalism (Fer 2005, 414–420).

For many of the young Pacific peoples of New Zealand, in particular those from the parishes of Pacific Islanders Presbyterian Churches, Island Breeze seemed to offer the possibility of a "new birth" that was both cultural and religious. Often disqualified by church leaders because of their integration into the dominant New Zealand culture and their weak grasp of Polynesian languages, these young people found a way to transform their religious and cultural identity on a personal basis, escaping from the tutelage of the traditional authorities. Due to the relative uncertainty created by the migration situation and the multicultural context of New Zealand, this freedom "to be oneself" has opened the door to different elaborations of identity and variable symbolic affiliations, outside of a single insular national or village identity inherited from a preceding generation. Accordingly, the founder of the New Zealand branch of Island Breeze is a New Zealand-born Samoan who "has always considered himself a Maori."¹⁴ The former international president of YWAM, Frank Naea, who was part of Island Breeze for fifteen years, was born in New Zealand to a Maori mother and a Samoan father, and prefers to define himself as Polynesian or indigenous.¹⁵

14. Interview, September 19, 2005, with Ray Totorewa, national director of Island Breeze in New Zealand, in Tauranga.

15. Interview with Frank Naea, October 5, 2005, in Auckland.

Here we can observe the two circles of belonging with which the young people converted by Island Breeze simultaneously identify. The first of these denotes a supranational bond (Polynesians) or a regional one (Pacific Islanders), a resurgence of the ideal of the Pacific Way, which, in a context of migration, is supported by the Pacific peoples' subculture that stems from a common experience of social domination and a double cultural distance:

[They] had in many cases, grown up in extended families, lived in similar homes in the same suburbs, attended the same schools and churches, competed in the same school cultural festivals and Sunday schools scriptural examinations, played in the same rugby and netball teams.... Many were also aware they shared another experience: an identity which was different from both their island-born parents and their local hosts (Anae 1998). This provided the platform for the emergence of a "sub- culture" based on common descent and similar experience. (Macpherson 2004, 143)

Transformed by evangelical missionary networks like YWAM or Youth For Christ into a transnational identity whose cultural and Christian dimensions are indissociable, this subculture takes on the form of a southern Christianity, reclaiming Christian faith as a cultural element that is distinct from Western de-Christianization.

The second, and larger, circle of belonging is that of indigenous peoples, a plural form of identity reference that reflects international networks of global indigeneity. Their structuring was encouraged by the increasing acknowledgement of questions of indigeneity within UN organizations and the setting up of consultation spaces, such as the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Based on common experiences—colonization, land dispossession, exploitation, cultural repression, and so forth—this solidarity led to the elaboration of a generic indigeneity (Morin 2009), a metaidentity most often defined in terms of specific relationships to land and ancestors. Evangelical Protestantism, whose innate individualism makes it *a priori* closed to these types of identity claims, has nevertheless highlighted them in bringing "born again" indigenous peoples into focus, at the cost of a number of ambiguities and internal tensions. Island Breeze now has a presence in Florida, the Philippines, Brazil, and the Amerindian community in Missouri. And its actions inspired the creation of a world assembly of indigenous Christian peoples (the World Christian Gathering of Indigenous Peoples; WCGIP), which met for the first time in 1996 in Auckland at the invitation of the Maori leader Monte Ohia. But in the Pacific, it is within multicultural societies characterized by migration, namely Australia and in New Zealand, that Island Breeze has experienced its most important developments.

Within YWAM and evangelical Charismatic currents of the same tendency, the perspective of a free rebuilding of personal identities through a "new birth" that is both cultural and religious is actually thwarted by opposing logics of identity assignment and of the symbolic reterritorialization of identity. The first logic relates to a naturalization of cultural diversity, something which is deplored even

within the ranks of YWAM by former members of Island Breeze. Accordingly, June Mataia, a Samoan singer-songwriter of “Christian music” that mixes Pacific rhythms with blues, jazz, and hip hop, deplors both the folkloric glamorization of Polynesian cultures and an overly essentialist approach to cultural identities:

A lot of misconception, even in our organization, is that when you are dark, when you are from the islands, you must know, so if I don’t know much about the true Samoan, whatever I give, that’s the culture. And so that’s the dilemma that we go through.¹⁶

The second logic stems from the growing influence, in both Oceania and elsewhere, of a theology of spiritual warfare, which, over the course of the last two decades, has contributed to a profound transformation of charismatic Protestantism’s relationship to culture and territory.

Spiritual Warfare: The Return of Territories

The theme of “spiritual warfare,” associated with the practices of “spiritual mapping,” which has resulted in a reterritorialization of the evangelical imaginary, appeared in the early 1990s in the writings of North American missiologists from the Pentecostal “third wave” (Cox 1995, 249 and following). In response to the moral liberation that began in the 1960s, and the rapid expansion of urban areas where individual mobility and the deterritorialization of religious affiliation dominated, reference to “spirits of place” is in their eyes the symbolic key that allows missionary action to regain a hold on Western societies that are in process of “de-Christianization.” For authors inspired by both their own missionary experience and anthropological literature, it was a case of “taking more seriously the worldviews of non-western traditional societies” (Ediger 2004, 268) with regard to tutelary spirits and links between the individual and territory. Floyd McClung, one of YWAM’s international leaders, explains that:

Demonic bondage is normally associated with individuals, but the moral disintegration of our society makes the possibility of large-scale spiritual warfare against entire cities or nations seem possible.... If we have a view of sin that is limited to personal choices, we will miss an important truth: Cities and nations take on spiritual characters and lives of their own. (McClung 1991, 29–31)

The deliverance of “territorial, social and institutional bodies deemed to be under the domination of demonic powers” (Ediger 2004, 269) supposes an exploration of space and history in order to identify the places, the “doors” and “keys,” on which eventual victory against the spirits of evil depends. Alongside C. Peter Wagner, this movement’s flagship author, Youth With A Mission leaders have played an essential role in the elaboration and diffusion of this theology, including in the Pacific islands, where it has partly mixed with cultural understandings of links between the individual and their place of birth and a

16. Interview, April 29, 2005, with June Mataia on Kona, Big Island, Hawaii.

traditional etiology that links places, spirits, and disease (Grand 2007, 167 and following).¹⁷

The shift in missionary engagement from the individual towards the territory, and its implications for the status conferred on indigenous peoples, who are elevated to the level of spiritual guardians of lands to be conquered, has also found an important echo among the Protestant communities of Oceania. It remains difficult to measure the exact magnitude of this as there is an absence of precise ethnographic studies, with the exception of an article published in 2005 by Dan Jorgensen, the title of which highlights the different levels of analysis that this phenomenon implies: “Third Wave Evangelism and the Politics of the Global in Papua New Guinea: Spiritual Warfare and the Recreation of Place in Telefomin” (Jorgensen 2005). At the national level, Jorgensen recalls the organization in 1997, 1999, and 2002 of several “operations” (C. P. Wagner uses this term to make reference to methods of planning military operations) that aimed to secure spiritual control of the territory of Papua New Guinea. In doing this, the second of these operations, named “Prayer Wall,” saw several teams of “intercessors” pray at several strategic places, such as ministries or parliament, while another team hired an official airplane “to fly along the border with Irian Jaya, praying that Papua New Guinea might be protected from outside evil influences. They also circumnavigated the entire country in a navy patrol boat, erecting a ‘prayer wall’” (Gibbs 2005, cited by Jorgensen 2005, 449). At the local level, Jorgensen also describes the impact of Operation Joshua, undertaken in 2002, in a remote village in the mountains of western Sepik. In this village the most of the inhabitants were already converted to Charismatic Protestantism; the operation entailed the destruction of a spirit house, with the aim of breaking a “demonic stronghold.” This destruction underlines two characteristics of these practices of cartography and spiritual warfare. Firstly, the life of local converts is affected, independently of their individual beliefs, by their belonging to a territory that includes a given place which, because it is considered to be the seat of evil spirits (associated with history, with ancestors), must be wiped off the map. Secondly, the place acquires an additional meaning because spiritual cartography has identified it as one of the points of a “triangle of sorcery” whose influence extends over the whole country.

According to a Tahitian Pentecostalist who took part in training given by YWAM in Tonga in 1993, the spiritual mapping schools teach that each person’s destiny is profoundly rooted in the land that he or she belongs to, but that many “roots”—also called “links with the past”—must be cut. Converts must undertake “research into what went before, the sins, the roots of the past.... And to uproot all the forces that Satan has planted, whichever the country, it is

17. See in particular Gilles Vidal’s article and the place accorded by contextual theologies to land in their representations of Pacific cultural identity.

necessary to go deeper... , to really break them down so as to make prayer truly effective.”¹⁸ The reaffirmation of a direct link between individuals and territories therefore goes along with a profound reconfiguration of the relationship with the local past, following the lines drawn by an evangelical theory of the “redemption of cultures” that ultimately produces an “indigenous Christian” identity.

While attending the celebration of the 150th anniversary Treaty of Waitangi in 1990,¹⁹ John Dawson, a New Zealander and the current international president of YWAM, was convinced by an exercise in spiritual mapping applied to New Zealand that the Maori people were the spiritual gatekeepers of the land of Aotearoa (New Zealand). This belief gave rise to a duty to recognize the primacy of indigenous rights (in keeping with the official Maori-Pākehā biculturalism that was established during the 1980s and 1990s), but also the need to concentrate missionary efforts on the conversion of the Maori to evangelical Protestantism. During a national conference of New Zealand evangelicals in 1997 a twofold perspective was adopted by the Maori leader Monte Ohia: repentance and reconciliation between the Maori and God first of all, and then between the Maori and the Pākehā (Bruce 1997, 130–145). The reworking (and reduction) of indigenous cultural content in the name of their required “Christianization” therefore goes alongside processes of reappropriation and remobilization of identities. And these arguments made by North American theoreticians of spiritual warfare in returning—by one of those unexpected detours of religious globalization—to the non-Western societies that provided their inspiration, have ultimately given shape to one of those paradoxes of Pentecostal expansion: “a religion that localizes easily yet claims to brook no compromise with traditional life and that at the same time seems to have at its heart a set of globalized practices that often look very local in their makeup” (Robbins 2003, 224).

Conclusion: From the Solomon Islands to Jerusalem via California

July 2009 in Pasadena, California. The seventh edition of the All Pacific Prayer Assembly is meeting at the invitation of its Micronesian representatives, in order to pray for the “salvation of the nations” and the accomplishment of the prophetic Deep Sea Canoe Vision, received in 1986 by the Solomon Island pastor Michael Maeliau (Maeliau 2007), according to which a cloud, formed in one of the Solomon Island valleys, will float over the Pacific nations before being changed into a wave then a tsunami, reaching the coasts of America, before

18. Interview with Mario Teaniuniuraitemoana, April, 24, 2002, Pirae, Tahiti, French Polynesia.

19. Agreed in 1840 between Britain and Maori chiefs, with the assistance of Protestant missionaries, the Treaty of Waitangi is now regarded as the foundation of New Zealand biculturalism, which sealed the alliance between the first inhabitants of the land of Aotearoa and the Pākehā, New Zealanders of Western origin.

finally departing towards the west, towards the Pacific, Asia, and the continent of Africa. The launching of this movement, in 1991, in the Solomon Islands, marked the start of this enterprise of re-evangelization that would bring an “awakening” from the “ends of the earth” right up to Jerusalem and compel the establishment of “Christian governments” in the Pacific.

This Californian installment provides a sort of condensed illustration of the complex processes by which current evangelical networks in Oceania are involved in a profound reconfiguration of militant Christianity and the relationship linking individuals, cultures, and territories. It shows in particular the striking fashion in which Pentecostal globalization contributes to both the transnationalization of religious identities and their reterritorialization (Mary 2000, 118). Buying into the saga of Pacific missionary and the ambition of a Pacific Way, the prayer assembly weaves new networks of solidarity between “born again” Christians from the Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian islands. Supported by YWAM, these networks transcend denominational frontiers by bringing together believers from Charismatic and Pentecostal churches or from the evangelical currents of the historic Protestant churches through interactions over the Internet and regional flows. They also include the Pacific diasporas that extend from New Zealand to the coasts of California, since it is the presence of an important migrant community from Micronesia that has led to the organization of this 2009 Californian installment.²⁰ Finally, the movement showcases a Pacific cultural pride and the primordial relationship between identity and land, by, for example, inviting each participant from the 2004 meeting to each take a stone to build in Tahiti a “temple of David,” symbolically erected in the country that finds itself at the “ends of the earth.”²¹ The California prayer assembly is held on the ancestral lands of the Hopi Amerindians, who are acknowledged as spiritual guardians of the land during a formal ceremony. In deterritorializing itself by including the transnational Pacific communities in a “vision” of an evangelical reconquest of the world, the movement acts as a junction between the global network of “indigenous Christians” whose representatives are present in Pasadena.

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20. One of the movement’s founders, the Samoan pastor Milo Siilata lives on Leonore Road, in the heart of South Auckland’s Polynesian neighborhoods... and also a few meters from YWAM’s national HQ in New Zealand.

21. For the movement’s leaders, this “extremity,” the geographically furthest point from Jerusalem, is situated in the south of the island of Rapa, in the Austral Isles archipelago.

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Abstract

The spectacular growth of Evangelical Protestantism and its "network culture" in Polynesia relies on regional migrations and young generations who aspire to disentangle personal faith and obedience to church authority. And yet, this growth can't be simply reduced to a trend of globalisation, breaking away from the deep cultural roots of historical Protestantism in the region. The analysis of regional networks linked with the charismatic international organisation Youth With a Mission thus shows how some Evangelical movements re-appropriate, in their own terms, the Polynesian missionary history and local cultural identities; and how they finally interpret them in the frame of a global theology of spiritual warfare combining a "folklorisation" of culture and a de-territorialisation of personal membership with the exaltation of the "natural" bonds between individuals and territories.

Key words: networks, Evangelicals, culture, territory, Polynesia.