

Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion

By Phyllis Herda Michael Reilly And David Hilliard Eds, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005, 344 pages, paperback, \$31.78. Reviewed by Christine Cheater in the [April 2006](#) issue.

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Religion plays a central role in Pacific history. Before the arrival of the Europeans religious considerations dominated the social organisation of many Pacific Islander communities. The region was one of the first areas of operation for the London Mission Society and both Protestant and Catholic missionaries have been active in the region since the early nineteenth century. Religious institutions continue to play a role in the provision of education and medical services on the Pacific Islands and around 90 per cent of Pacific Islanders actively practice a faith. *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion* explores the religious history of the Pacific Islands from pre-contact to recent developments. It is dedicated to Neil Gunson, who was the common PhD supervisor of the contributors to this volume.

Gunson wrote the authoritative work on Protestant Pacific Island missions, *Messengers of Grace* (Melbourne, 1978), which not only described the social background, theologies and activities of the missionaries but also those of the peoples of the Pacific the missionaries had come to convert. This dual focus on the beliefs and practices of the Europeans and Pacific Islanders enabled him to show how the missionaries' intentions were subtly changed to suit local conditions. Another aspect of Gunson's influence was his emphasis on the importance of knowledge gained through participant history. Pacific historians usually spend a substantial part of their thesis time on particular islands and consequently have developed an interdisciplinary approach to their studies. These influences are obvious in this collection of essays.

The essays are organised in roughly chronological order moving from the pre-contact period to the present day. The first two essays Phyllis Herda's 'Narratives of Gender and Pre-eminence: the Hikule'o Myths of Tango' and Kieran Schmidt's 'The Gift of the Gods: the Sacred Chiefs, Priests and Supernatural Symbols in Traditional Samoa' examine the role of traditional religion in Pacific Island societies. Both of these articles demonstrate the interdisciplinary approach taken in this book. Herda gives a gendered reading of myths relating to the god Hikule'o to show how the sexual ambiguity of this god reflects rank and status in Tongan society. Similarly Schmidt applies anthropological techniques to traditional Samoan beliefs, drawing on kinship studies to demonstrate the relationship between religious deities, genealogy and social status in Samoan society.

The following chapter -- Hank Driessen's 'The Trails and Tribulations of a Polynesian Priest' -- signals the arrival of the Europeans in the Pacific. In this chapter Driessen attempts to unravel the life and time of Tupa`ia, who acted as an information for Joseph Banks. He accompanied Cook and Banks on part of their first voyage, guided them to the Leeward Islands and Borabora, served as an interpreter when they reached New Zealand and died when the ship reached Java.

The next four chapters deal with the establishment of missions in the Pacific. In 'God in Samoa and the Introduction of Catholicism' Andrew Hamilton covers a number of issues including the theological background of the Marists priest who arrive in Samoa in the 1840s, their reactions to Samoan traditions and the reasons why Samoans accepted Catholicism. Micheal Reilly -- 'Te 'Orama a Numangatini' and the Receptions of Christianity on Mangaia -- shows how dreams functioned as an historical narrative of the acceptance of Christianity in the islands of Mangaia. Andrew Thornley -- Through a Glass Darkly Ownership of Fijian Methodism (1850-1890) -- looks at nineteenth century attempts by Fijian born missionaries to wrest control over the direction of their church from overseas missionaries. A similar struggle is narrated by Ross Mackay in 'A Church in Papua or a Papuan Church? Conservatism and Resistance to Indigenous Leadership in a Melanesian Mission'.

The other six chapters cover a range of religious topics. Diane Langmore -- 'Where Tides Meet' The Missionary Career of Constance (Paul) Fairhall in Papua -- looks at how the work of a missionary nurse was devoted, not to the ideal of saving, but to that of service. In 'The God of the Melanesian Mission' David Hilliard analyses how Christian missionaries viewed the relationship between their god and the gods of the people they were trying to convert. David Wetherell compares missionary work in 'The Anglicans in New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands' and attempts to explain why mission work in Australia was less successful. Norman Douglas -- 'Unto the Islands of the Sea: The Erratic Beginnings of Mormon Missions in Polynesia, 1844-1900' -- explains how Mormon missionaries set out to convert white settlers in Hawaii and ended up converting Polynesians on a number of Pacific Islands. Graham Hassell traces the spread of 'The Baha'i Faith in the Pacific'. **Finally, in 'Doing Theology in the New Pacific' Kambati Uriam examines the theological reflections of Pacific Islander Christians since the second world war.**

The range of issues raised in *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion* illustrate the importance of faith in the Pacific Islands as well as the insight into both Islander and missionary cultures that can be gained through the study of religious history in the region. While following the arguments in the various chapters does require some background knowledge of Pacific history and Islander cultures, the essays are well written and assessable to the interested reader. Either the book as a whole, or the individual essays,

could be used as recommended readings for tertiary education courses on Pacific, religious or colonial history.

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- If religion exists at the heart of every human culture, this is especially the case in the Pacific Islands. The people of the Pacific have been described as 'deeply religious', with most Islanders actively following a faith. The importance of religion and its institutions in the Pacific is marked by the extent of their involvement in all parts of island society, including services such as education and medicine.

Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion explores the religious history of the Pacific Islands, examining the local receptions of Christianity and other faiths, and their varying processes of indigenisation. Regionally diverse, this collection is premised on the integration of the many gods or spiritual beings indigenous to the islands and the diverse understandings of foreign gods - such as Christianity's Jehovah - that have developed as a result of contact with missionary religions.

Early chapters explore the indigenous deities of Oceania and the new visions of the Christian God at the moment of its reception in the Pacific Islands. Further works narrate the consolidation and growth of missions during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, highlighting the ways that divine vision was worked out in the practical politics of individual missionaries. The final chapters draw these studies into a broader Pacific context, examining forays into Polynesia by the American Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the postwar establishment of the Baha'i faith in the Pacific, and the nature of theological practice and education in the Pacific.

