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# Conversion and Church Formation in Tuvalu\*

MICHAEL GOLDSMITH AND DOUG MUNRO

NOW AN INDEPENDENT NATION, TUVALU WAS PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS THE ELLICE Islands and formed part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. The formal colonial connection began in 1892 when a British protectorate was declared. With the assumption of British rule a powerful new element impinged on this tiny island world which altered existing relationships between Tuvaluans and foreigners, gradually giving Tuvalu the basis for a wider sphere of participation with the outside world. An equally important influence has been Christianity, which affected the affairs of each island at every level, and whose introduction predates that of colonialism proper by three decades. The London Missionary Society (LMS) took over Tuvalu by degrees, from its early successes in the mid-1860s until pagan resistance in the three northernmost islands was broken a decade later. The archipelago has remained a Protestant stronghold ever since, despite the recent incursions by Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, Bahai, and Mormons, and the reintroduction of Catholicism. Today the Tuvalu Church (the local successor of the LMS) is an autonomous body affiliated to the Council for World Mission.

Tuvalu began its formal association with Protestantism in 1865 as an outpost of LMS enterprise in Samoa. By that time LMS operations in the Pacific were organised from a number of permanent mission stations (or District Committees) under the oversight of a handful of European missionaries. One of the tasks of the District Committees was to spread the gospel to smaller neighbouring islands and island groups. In practice, the evangelisation of these outstations, as they were known, was undertaken not by the European missionaries but by ordained Polynesian teachers whose work was subject to periodic inspection by one of their European 'superiors' on a deputation visit in the mission vessel. Tuvalu fitted into the LMS scheme of things as part of the Northwest Outstations of the Samoan District Committee, and the thrust of evangelisation was left to the mainly Samoan teachers and pastors whom the LMS stationed on each island.<sup>1</sup>

\* We thank Peter Harrison, John Garrett, Raeburn Lange, Niel Gunson, Niko Besnier, and the anonymous referees, for their comments and suggestions. Since some of our conclusions are not shared by all of those mentioned, it is important to emphasise that we claim responsibility for our interpretation and for any errors. Doug Munro wishes to acknowledge the support of The Flinders University of South Australia, which awarded him a Visiting Research Fellowship, Oct.–Dec. 1990, within the School of Social Sciences.

<sup>1</sup> The spread of LMS enterprise in the Pacific before 1860 is outlined in Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: evangelical missionaries in the South Seas, 1797–1860* (Melbourne 1978), 11–28. On the Samoan District Committee see R. P. Gilson, *Samoa, 1830–1900: the politics of a multi-cultural community* (Melbourne 1970), 92.

What follows is a brief survey of the process by which Tuvalu was annexed to the LMS fold and a discussion of the criteria predicating the formation of churches on the individual islands. We begin with the premise that conversion and church formation are importantly but contingently related. One does not entail the other in exact ways. Conversion is defined here as significant change in the belief systems of individuals. Applied to the members of a group it is a lengthy and incremental process, the evidence for which is complex and unclear. It is especially difficult to judge from fragmentary records written by outsiders, which is what the relevant sources often are in the Tuvalu case. There is no doubt that some such phenomenon occurred in Tuvalu, but precisely when, where and how is difficult to reconstruct with certainty. In taking this view we are not in fact very far removed from the well-known idea in Protestant theology that since conversion is a matter of people's innermost spiritual states it may never be empirically 'provable' to anyone, even to the person concerned.<sup>2</sup>

Church formation, on the other hand, is a relatively clearcut and empirically observable episode. We do not focus on it simply for that reason, however. Rather, it is important because, in the Tuvalu case and possibly elsewhere, it marks the imposition of missionary hegemony as opposed to the often internally inspired process of conversion. We conclude that the expressed sanction of a constituted authority — namely the visiting European missionary — was deemed necessary by the LMS before a church came into being. This interpretation stands in direct opposition to the view that the formation of churches is a more gradual process involving their 'slow growth as more or less organically, functionally emerging communities of prayer, singing and "sacral", or . . . *tapu*, quality'.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the theological limitations of our argument, it is sociologically useful. It provides a straightforward benchmark for comparison with missionisation in other societies and it focuses attention on the often very different perceptions of the consumers (who thought they wanted Christianity) and the providers (who attempted to define what Christianity entailed).

IN 1961 the then Ellice Islands Church celebrated the centenary of the coming of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> In one sense the date was correct, as 1861 marked the arrival of the first LMS teacher in the island group: Elekana, a deacon from Manihiki in the northern Cook Islands. His arrival, however, was purely accidental, not the result of LMS design. Blown off course on a boat voyage between Manihiki and neighbouring Rakahanga, Elekana and his eight companions drifted for eight weeks or

<sup>2</sup> Of relevance here is Peter G. Stromberg, 'Ideological language in the transformation of identity', *American Anthropologist*, 92 (1989), 42–56; Stromberg argues that 'conversion' is a label that people often apply to themselves *ex post facto*, thereby helping to resolve 'persistent emotional ambivalence'.

<sup>3</sup> John Garrett, pers. comm., 18 Feb. 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Te 100 Tausaga o te Tala Lei i Elise, 1861–1961 — The Coming of the Gospel to the Ellice Islands* ([Funafuti] 1961). This little booklet contains the programme for the centenary celebrations at Nukulaelea.

more with almost no food and no water until, close to death, they were washed up at Nukulaelae in southern Tuvalu. There, Elekana's ability to communicate the gospel and to begin teaching literacy, by means of a Rarotongan New Testament that he had carried with him, was welcomed by the people of the atoll who, it seemed, were waiting for a resident Christian teacher to call their own.

Elekana, however, was not yet an ordained pastor. He made this point clear to his hosts and insisted that he must leave Nukulaelae for training after which he could return. Eventually he made his way to Samoa where, having convinced the LMS missionaries based there that the islands of Tuvalu were clamouring for their attention, he attended the theological institute at Malua. In May 1865, by now an ordained pastor, he sailed to Tuvalu with the Rev. A. W. Murray and two Samoan teachers in the German trading vessel *Augustita*.<sup>5</sup>

Elekana himself was not returned by Murray to Nukulaelae, as he might have wished, but was placed at Nukufetau where, despite a population no less eager for enlightenment, he laboured with disappointing results. Five years later, the visiting missionary removed him from his post for various indiscretions.<sup>6</sup> The important point to note is the power of the European missionary, the Rev. S. J. Whitmee, to remove him from his office. No doubt the teachers on other islands were made aware of the punishment. Nevertheless, Elekana's earlier achievement underpins the significance of the 1961 centenary celebrations. To treat Elekana's initial arrival as the starting-point of church growth in Tuvalu, as the Tuvalu Church does, is to define its importance retrospectively and to imagine it as a trajectory, of which the later missionary voyages from 1865 onwards are seen as an inevitable outcome. The result of those voyages — the replacement of a pagan hegemony by a Protestant one — can then be explained teleologically, as contained within its beginning.

From such a perspective, it is logical to see the acceptance of Christianity in Tuvalu as an essentially unbroken process. True, it might be argued, the gospel met some resistance and there were some stumbling blocks and backsliding, but overall its progress has officially been interpreted as continuous and irreversible. Indeed it is possible to trace the trajectory back well before 1861, to religious upheavals and outside influences from whalers and traders which occurred before missionaries set foot on any of the islands but which can be interpreted as preparing the ground for the coming of the LMS. As Murray put it, he found 'an open door [in 1865] and nothing to do but to enter in'.<sup>7</sup> The LMS interpretations, of course, assumed that these prior moves towards Christianisation,

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Murray, *Forty Years Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea, 1835-1875* (London 1876), 375-93.

<sup>6</sup> We are currently preparing a more detailed account of Elekana's life and career in Tuvalu.

<sup>7</sup> A. W. Murray, 'Missionary voyage to the Lagoon Islands', *Missionary Magazine* (Dec. 1865), 341.

though significant, were halting and fragile. On any other reading, the commemoration of 1861 as marking the coming of the gospel is arbitrary.

It is in this light that Elekana's story and the various commentaries on it are vital sources of information on the state of Tuvalu prior to missionisation. They show that important changes had already taken place at Nukulaelae before his arrival. The following descriptions of the same event are suggestive, despite their differences and lack of detail.

The first quotation is from the biographical essay on Elekana written by a European missionary in Samoa before Elekana's fall from favour.

They said they once had an idol and a sacred house for it, but the captain of a vessel one day asked them to burn it. They said if they did that, whatever would become of them all! The captain said there was no danger — that the God of heaven would look down and take care of them — and urged them still to burn the house. They set fire to it, and burned the house, idol, and all. The captain was glad, and said it was good, that God saw it, and that they were now to sit and wait, and they would see how God would be kind to them.<sup>8</sup>

The second quotation is from Elekana's own account.

In the lagoons round these islands the people get a good deal of pearl-shell, part of which they offered to their idols, the rest was their own. Some time before we left Manihiki, a Captain Stewart arrived in his vessel at Nukulaelae in quest of pearl-shell. He urged the people to burn their idols and temples, saying he would purchase the idols' shell. They did so after they had been paid for the shell. They soon got afraid at what they had done, and went to the captain, saying 'What are we to do now: that was our god by which we live'. The captain said, 'That god of yours is no God. God is in heaven and He sees you turn your thoughts to Him, and He will take care of you'. The captain left, and the people remained without any god, or without any mode of worship till Thomas came, when he conducted service with them. Bye-and-bye a vessel arrived at the land, when some one went on board, and bought an English Bible, which they brought ashore. They built a meeting-house at each of the three villages and Thomas went to each in turn on the Sabbaths.<sup>9</sup>

The man referred to as 'Thomas' was probably Tom Rose, whose ambiguous role in Christianisation we acknowledge shortly. For now, it is the general features of these two roughly similar accounts that concern us. Certain aspects of the overthrow of the pagan system stand out. The destruction of 'shrines' and the abandonment of 'heathen practices' were followed by the adoption of rituals presumed to be Christian and a rise in influence of certain individuals who claimed to offer the protection of the new religion. The desire for literacy and for items of Western manufacture also played its part. Interest in the new religion was likewise evidenced in 1863 by the willingness of people, at Nukulaelae and

<sup>8</sup> George Turner, 'Narrative of Elikana [sic], a native of Manihiki', *Juvenile Missionary Magazine* (1865), 341. For other accounts of the destruction of pagan shrines in southern Tuvalu, see W. J. Sollas, 'The legendary history of Funafuti', *Nature*, 1424 (1897), 354–55; Tanielu Alefaio, 'Te okomainga o te Lotu ki Vaitupu', *Te Lama* (Funafuti), (Apr.–June 1979), 16–17.

<sup>9</sup> 'Elikana's [sic] story' (trans. Jane Chalmers), *Juvenile Missionary Magazine* (June–Oct. 1872), 148.

Funafuti in particular, to go aboard Peruvian slave ships on the promise of their captains to transport them to a land where they might be instructed in the Christian religion.<sup>10</sup>

These phenomena, had they occurred more recently and in Melanesia, would probably have been appropriated into the interminable debate over 'cargo cults', millenarian movements, nativism, and so on. We intend to minimise the conceptual pitfalls by summarising the time of relatively frequent European contact, from 1820 onwards by whalers, traders and other voyagers, as a sustained period of cultural crisis. On each island, that period formally came to an end with the establishment of a congregational church, an event which occurred earlier in the southern islands than in the northern.

The best described moment of that crisis took place on Nanumaga in 1875, 10 years after LMS teachers had been accepted at the five southern islands. Ioane, the newly arrived Samoan pastor, was deeply involved in what transpired, but as facilitator rather than initiator, because the decision to abandon the old religion had been taken by the chiefs. The unusual feature of the Nanumaga episode was that the process of religious renunciation and acceptance was drastically compressed, certainly by comparison with other Tuvalu islands. In that sense, it was like the crisis of an illness, the turning point at which the patient begins to recover or to decline. The fact that the crisis passed so swiftly on Nanumaga denotes extraordinary skill on the part of community leaders in managing the transition. All the business of reaching consensus had been negotiated beforehand, leaving Ioane to enact a decision already made.

At midnight he [Ioane] was waked up by two of the chiefs, who asked him to rise and go with them. They took him to the bush away from the hearing of every body and there they talked. They said they had made up their minds to turn over, but their great difficulty was how to get rid of the relics or gods. He said he had no fear of them, and was ready to burn or bury or remove [them] in any way they liked. This was all they wanted and they decided to let him be the executioner the following day.

The day came — five of the chiefs took their seats surrounded by all the people, and Ioane was sent for. The first thing to be done was to remove from the necks of these men the sacred necklaces which were supposed to link them on the special protection of the gods. It was considered death for anyone to remove them, but Ioane stepped forward and broke the fragile net work — the people staring in astonishment and expecting every moment to see him fall down dead. The necklaces were removed, the spell was broken, the weakness of the gods manifest — and now said he: 'Let us pray', and there and then he led their thoughts in prayer to the true God. He was then directed to go and break down the altars in the temples, remove the skulls and stone idols, and also the clubs and spears of the gods. Every

<sup>10</sup> H. E. Maude, *Slavers in Paradise: the Peruvian labour trade in Polynesia, 1862–1864* (Canberra 1981), 74–82; Doug Munro, 'The Peruvian slavers in Tuvalu, 1863: how many did they kidnap?', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 90 (1990), 43–46.

eye followed him, many still looking upon him as a dead man. In went his axe to the two pillars sacred to the 'shooting star' god. He handled carefully the skulls as he took them from their places, and respectfully covered them with a piece of Samoan native cloth. Some of the clubs and spears from the armoury of the gods came in handy as a railing for the court house which they decided to use as a temporary Chapel. Ioane proposed one of the temples but did not urge it, and next day he had a congregation of 98 — all professing by their appearance there that Lord's day that they had given up heathenism. On the Monday they proceeded with the burial of the skulls and other sacred relics from the temples, and family skull houses. Some of the new converts helped Ioane, and in that grave of heathenism dug in the village malae or place of public meeting they laid 134 skulls — 1 wooden idol 2 stone idols — 14 shell trumpets used in calling assemblies, and a lot of clubs and spears used only by order of the gods.<sup>11</sup>

Among the more interesting interpretative possibilities of this description<sup>12</sup> are the power relationships involved. Ioane wraps the skulls in *siapo* (bark cloth), possibly to neutralise their power or to encompass them with power objects from his own culture. He suggests that some of the ritual objects be placed as railings in the meeting house being used for a chapel, and this is agreed to. But when he suggests that the Nanumagans conduct services in one of their temples, there is apparent resistance. Ioane's power as a teacher and a breaker of *tapu* (forbidden actions) was considerable, but such head-on confrontation with the traditional power structures was going too far, at least for the moment. The powers of the teacher were still highly ambiguous and volatile, and lacked a crucial dimension.

This missing dimension was put in place by the establishment of a church on each island. 'Church' in this sense refers to the body of church members or communicants (in Tuvaluan, *ekalesia*).<sup>13</sup> The creation of such a collectivity occurred unevenly throughout the archipelago, depending on the state to which the implanted teachers had brought their congregations and the degree of difficulty experienced in doing so.

Missionaries with the rather rigid Free Church background common to the LMS felt that the formation of *ekalesia* required their presence and approval. The formation of churches was also affected by the doctrinal stance of individual missionaries and of their parent bodies. A longstanding controversy in Christian thought divided those who supported a 'parish' type of church from those who felt that bodies of worshippers should be 'gathered' on the basis of much stricter

<sup>11</sup> George Turner, 1876 Journal, 27–29, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (hereinafter SOAS), Records of the LMS, South Sea Journals (hereinafter SSJ), no. 168. See also W. Wyatt Gill, *Jottings from the Pacific* (London 1885), 27–9.

<sup>12</sup> See also the discussion in John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian origins in Oceania* (Geneva/Suva 1982), 158–9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ekalesia* derives from the Greek word *ecclesia*, meaning 'assembly'. It entered early Christian discourse as a term for 'church'. In the Pacific, the transliterated term followed the route of the LMS from Tahiti to the Cooks, Samoa and then to outposts such as Tuvalu.

criteria. A missionary with the former stance might well accept the 'converts' already meeting together and immediately baptise them into the church, and perhaps even administer the sacraments to someone professing belief and not likely to live. Under this system, admission to the sacraments is less rigidly controlled than in the Free Churches. On the other hand the Congregational Churches (and other Free Churches) only admitted persons as 'members of the church', i.e. communicants, who had made a statement of faith to the other members and who were acknowledged by the pastor, deacons and other members to be living consistently with that statement.

The LMS missionaries who visited Tuvalu, with their predominantly Congregationalist background, clearly aligned themselves with the second position. Hence they felt that the formation of *ekalesia* required their supervision and approval, particularly when outstations were involved. The degree of control they exercised and the standards they required may not have been universal amongst the proselytising societies working in the Pacific, but even those missionaries who accepted the existing bodies of worshippers as an immediate starting point tended to see their role as one of providing the final seal of approval. It follows that the term 'conversion to Christianity' was incomplete in European eyes until a properly constituted church was formed and placed under supervision, even if that supervision were sporadic. Moreover, those in favour of parish type churches were faced with the problem that the wider society was usually not yet Christian so there was no pre-existing community of believers to draw on. One variant of Free Church theology, paedobaptism, distinguishes between 'nurtured Christians' (i.e. those baptised at infancy) and 'converts'. Since in Tuvalu and other parts of the Pacific there was no significant body of nurtured Christians, the difference between those inside the Church and those outside was highlighted, as was the role of the missionary who had the initial task of making the selection from among candidates for membership. The events on the southern islands of Tuvalu during the early 1860s, which may be seen as a transitional stage, were certainly a conversion from paganism, but it is less clear what they were a conversion to. As far as the missionaries were concerned it was only nominal Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

At Nukulaelae in the early 1860s, the beachcomber Tom Rose's Sunday services consisted simply of a hymn, a reading from the Bible and its translation into the Tuvaluan language. 'When he had finished doing so they all went away; there was no prayer'.<sup>15</sup> At Vaitupu in 1865, Murray

found the people . . . earnestly desirous to have a teacher . . . they had destroyed their idols and renounced paganism, and they were observing the Sabbath after a fashion, but they were not attempting to keep up any regular service. Some

<sup>14</sup> Niel Gunson, pers. comm., 19 June 1990, contributed to the development of the ideas expressed in this and the previous paragraph.

<sup>15</sup> 'Elikana's story', 147.

foreigner had been living among them, had taught them the Lord's Prayer in English, and something in the form of a prayer in their own language.<sup>16</sup>

And at Nukufetau a few days earlier Murray noted that

Here, as elsewhere we had a warm welcome. The report of what had been done on other islands, in the way of destroying idols and abandoning idolatry, had reached this group, and they had followed the example of their neighbours, and for years they had been feeling after God and worshipping Him according to their measure of light. They had built a large chapel, about forty-five feet in length, and forty in breadth, a very good house considering their circumstances, and very neat and clean; and Sabbath after Sabbath the poor people were accustomed to meet and hold a sort of service. There was a platform on which the party conducting the service was accustomed to stand, and over that was an English Bible suspended carefully wrapped up in a cotton handkerchief. This they were accustomed to take down, and spread out open before the person officiating, while they sang or chanted one of three hymns, which some visitor or visitors had taught them. One of these was singularly inappropriate. It was the well-known hymn beginning, 'When I can read my title clear'. Of another, the burden or perhaps the chorus, was 'Hallelujah', and the third was in the Hawaiian language. But how strange to find a people in their circumstances thus acting! and how manifestly was our way prepared and the door wide and effectually set before us!<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, the changes engendered by Tuvaluans themselves, in which they enlisted the services of traders, castaways (such as Elekana) and the Samoan teachers, and, on the other hand, the structure imposed by the LMS missionary. Indigenously derived forms were swamped, though not necessarily obliterated, by Samoan pastoral hegemony; and while there may have been stages, types or degrees of conversion, the sociologically crucial measure is church formation or a similar moment of institutionalisation — sanctioned in this case by external authority. Whether or not Tuvaluans acquired 'genuine' beliefs and were or were not 'true' converts is irrelevant; the social structure of the church was not theirs to control once the LMS gained entry.

In the period after the first LMS voyage a Christian dispensation of sorts was established on several islands under the guidance of Samoan pastors but churches, as such, did not officially exist. The visit by Whitmee to Tuvalu in 1870 was pivotal in this respect. He brought the transitional period of the 1860s to a close in two ways: by removing Elekana and by establishing the first authorised churches in Tuvalu. He carried out the procedure four times during that epochal tour (see Table One); to put it another way, he was responsible for establishing half of the churches in Tuvalu in the space of a few days. The LMS had been unable to organise any deputationary voyages to Tuvalu between 1867 and 1869

<sup>16</sup> Murray, *Forty Years' Mission Work*, 388–9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 388–9. See also Turner, 1876 Journal, 11, SSJ 168; Julius L. Brenchley, *Jottings During the Cruise of H. M. S. Curacoa among the South Sea Islands in 1865* (London 1873), 70–1.

through not having its own vessel, so there is an arbitrary quality about the timing of church formation on some islands.

Whitmee's descriptions of events at each island are rather repetitious, so it is necessary to cite only the example of Nukulaelae.

No church had been formed on this island, but I found 40 candidates for membership. From the time of landing, soon after noon on Saturday till late at night, I was fully occupied either with Ioane the teacher [not the same Ioane of Nanumaga], or with the candidates, whom I examined individually. The next day being Sunday, I preached in the morning at 8 o'clock, after which I finished conversing with the candidates, and consulted with the teacher; of the 40 we decided on admitting 27. . . . The Teacher has evidently laboured faithfully, and the success which has attended his labours is seen in the fact that, with three or four exceptions, all the adults on the island are candidates for church membership. All those now admitted have been fully four years candidates, and have maintained a consistent deportment during the whole time.

At two o'clock p.m. we held a service for the formation of a church, which was attended by the whole population. I read the first part of the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, and delivered an address founded thereon. After this I explained the ordinance of baptism, and administered the rite to the 27 who were now united in Christian fellowship. After this we partook together of the Lord's Supper . . . . . a peculiar feeling of pleasure mingled with a sense of responsibility overcame me . . .<sup>18</sup>

TABLE 1 – ESTABLISHMENT OF CHURCHES IN TUVALU

<i>Island</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Missionary</i>
Nukulaelae	1870	S.J. Whitmee <sup>a</sup>
Funafuti	1870	S.J. Whitmee <sup>a</sup>
Vaitupu	1870	S.J. Whitmee <sup>a</sup>
Nui	1870	S.J. Whitmee <sup>a</sup>
Nukufetau	1871	Thomas Powell <sup>b</sup>
Niutao	1872	George Pratt <sup>c</sup>
Nanumea	1875	Henry Nisbet <sup>d</sup>
Nanumaga	probably 1877 <sup>e</sup>	(Thomas Powell)

<sup>a</sup> S.J. Whitmee, *A Missionary Cruise in the South Pacific . . . in 1870*, 2nd ed. (Sydney 1871), 11, 14, 15, 20.

<sup>b</sup> Powell, 1871 Journal, 24, SSJ 160.

<sup>c</sup> Pratt, 1872 Journal, 15, SSJ 163.

<sup>d</sup> Nisbet, 1875 Journal, 20, SSJ 167; Henry Nisbet, *Diary*, 244, entry for 27 Sept. 1875, London, Ontario, University of Western Ontario, Weldon Library (Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, PMB 417).

<sup>e</sup> The establishment of a church is not mentioned in the 1876 journal; the 1877 journal is missing from the LMS records.

This gets back to the very definition of 'conversion' itself. It is clear from many contemporary studies of Christianity in non-Western contexts that to require a

<sup>18</sup> S. J. Whitmee, *A Missionary Cruise to the South Pacific . . . in 1870*, 2nd ed (Sydney 1871), 11–12. Murray also highlighted the importance of church formation even though he never had the opportunity to carry it out in Tuvalu. He provided a detailed description of the establishment of the church at Vate in what is now Vanuatu, claiming that it would 'form an important era in the history' of the island. See A. W. Murray, *Missions in Western Polynesia* (London 1863), 427–8. In the same work he singled out for mention the dates of the first church formations in Samoa (*ibid.*, 453). The issue was apparently one of great salience to him.

'change of heart' as a sign of conversion is seen as ethnocentric and arbitrary by converts and missionaries alike. Kammerer's study of Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand is a case in point. 'What is important', she argues, 'is that Akha converts count themselves as Christians and missionaries count Akha Christians as converts'.<sup>19</sup> The crucial difference is that the 19th century LMS missionaries based church membership on much stricter criteria, ideally including a plausible profession of 'faith' and a reputation for good conduct, but reducing in practice to a knowledge of scripture and the recommendations of the teacher. Heart-felt acceptance of faith was important but not sufficient to qualify for church membership. At Nukulaelae, as mentioned above, Whitmee admitted 27 of the 40 candidates who presented themselves. A few days later at Vaitupu, there were 157 candidates but only 103 were admitted; he could, he explained, 'have admitted a great number but thought it would do them no harm to wait another year'.<sup>20</sup> Two years later in 1872 at Nukufetau only 23 of the 59 candidates were admitted.<sup>21</sup>

This reluctance to admit all candidates at once into the *ekalesia* was probably reinforced by tactical considerations. The southern Tuvalu islands were an easy missionary field in that the way had been 'prepared', to use Murray's phrase, through a combination of local social factors and outside influences. Amongst a population so apparently eager for the prize of church membership, some rigour in selection criteria would have contributed to the prestige and power of the church. The three northern islands were quite another proposition; the way had not been 'prepared' and resistance was encountered for several years. The LMS modified its evangelising strategy accordingly and employed the tactic of seeking chiefly favour in order to gain a mass following, and a church was formed as soon as was decently possible. This entailed accepting numbers of nominal Christians into the church in a manner that would not have been countenanced in the southern islands, and which later led to considerable soul-searching. Even so, the formal procedures were observed and the candidates still had to undergo examination and declaration.<sup>22</sup> At one level, then, Tuvalu provides a useful case-study of the discrepancy between LMS policy towards conversion and church membership, and its actual practice. At another level, the events in Tuvalu highlight the point that the classic definition of conversion entails a peculiarly Western notion of what constitutes a religion. The 19th century LMS, with its Free Church emphasis on knowledge of beliefs and practices, therefore appears more than ever ethnocentric.

<sup>19</sup> Cornelia Ann Kammerer, 'Customs and Christian conversion among Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand', *American Ethnologist*, 17 (1990), 285–6.

<sup>20</sup> Whitmee, *A Missionary Cruise*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> W. Wyatt Gill, 'Diary of a tour of the Gilbert, Ellice, Union and Loyalty Islands in the John Williams . . . 1872', Sydney, Mitchell Library, B1444.

<sup>22</sup> Doug Munro, 'The Lagoon Islands: a history of Tuvalu, 1820–1908', PhD thesis, Macquarie University (Sydney 1982), ch. 5.

THE RATHER lengthy quotations we have used in this paper serve a particular purpose. Our reading of them undermines the sense of a connection between the crises at Nukulaelae and Nanumaga and the institutional routinisation carried out by Whitmee. The sources do not reveal a causal or 'natural' link between the abolition of paganism and the adoption of an exogenous belief system. Rather, they point to a discontinuity between two very different situations. Whitmee's report is about what Michel Foucault has termed, in a different context, the imposition of pastoral power.<sup>23</sup> Up until the moment that this power was capable of being exercised, the status of the Samoan teachers and pastors was unresolved. After it had been applied, they were able to secure a position of influence paralleling that of the pre-Christian leaders.<sup>24</sup>

The discontinuity can be referred to in a number of ways. In historical terms, it is a temporal break of the greatest importance. If a benchmark for the comparative investigation of conversion is required, the imposition of pastoral power by means of church formation stands out. It reflects the contingency of the conversion process, which was neither uninterrupted nor inevitable, and which has had a variety of outcomes in Pacific societies.<sup>25</sup>

In sociological terms, the discontinuity is structural in form. It produced a distinction, which is still of prime importance in contemporary Tuvalu, between *kau lotu* (congregation) and *ekalesia* (church members). The boundary between them is created by the power that the pastors have enjoyed since 1875<sup>26</sup> to bestow, withhold or withdraw membership in the *ekalesia*. All the evidence suggests that an internal division based on this sort of criterion was alien to the pre-Christian Tuvalu polity. The fact that membership is conditional underlies the attempts to suppress superstition by the church hierarchy and their perception of themselves as still being engaged in missionary work. We are dealing here with what Foucault calls 'disciplinary power'.<sup>27</sup> Through the establishment of a particular discourse of 'truth', procedures for the normalisation of individuals are set in place. Thus, while the institution of LMS churches may have begun in 1870, in the eyes of church officials, it is not yet complete. Furthermore, because of the disjunction between official and subaltern definitions of the situation, it can never be guaranteed.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Afterword: the subject and power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault — beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (Chicago 1982), 213–16.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Goldsmith, 'Church and society in Tuvalu', PhD thesis, University of Illinois (Urbana 1989), ch. 5; Munro, 'The Lagoon Islands', ch. 6. For comparative material on the use of the 'native agency' see Bela Vassady, Jr, 'Transplanting prejudices: the failure of the Baptist experiment using Jamaican "native agents" in Fernando Po and Cameroons, 1841–1850', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 25:2 (1979), 15–39.

<sup>25</sup> Similar conclusions have been reached with respect to the Watchtower and the Jehovah's Witness groups in colonial Zambia. See C. J. Martin, 'Millenarianism in Africa', *Critique of Anthropology*, 4:15 (1980), 85–93.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of General Meeting of the Samoan District Committee, 9–18 Nov. 1875, SOAS, LMS Records, South Seas Letters, 34/7/B.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (New York 1980), 105.