

# ***Autobiographical . . .***



## **UNDERSTANDING OR BELIEVING? on researching Christianity in Tuvalu**

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In the late 1970s, I embarked on a study of church and society in Tuvalu, then a newly independent Polynesian microstate in the central Pacific. The ongoing pursuit of this topic has involved me in two distinct but complementary forms of research, ethnographic and historical, and in attempts to marry their strengths as kindred but awkwardly related disciplines. Each approach raises specific epistemological questions; each poses specific dilemmas in practice. This essay will highlight the philosophical issues raised by the ethnographic dimension of my research on present-day religion, though the historical dimension plays an important if muted role in my account. While it may sometimes seem easier to venture interpretations from a ‘safe’ historical distance, especially in assessing the unequal struggles over missionisation in late nineteenth century Tuvalu (Goldsmith and Munro 1992a, 1992b), history is very much a resource in the creation of contemporary cultural identity. As such, judgements of the past cannot help but influence judgements of the present.

From the outset of my research, I faced important ethical considerations, not least the question of whether I, as an agnostic, had the 'right' to comment on and make judgements about other people's deeply held religious beliefs and cherished institutions. Note that this problem stands at an interesting tangent to one of the commonest critiques of anthropological research—the accusation that 'Western' ethnographers cannot hope to understand the inner meanings of other cultures. By studying Tuvaluan Christianity, I was turning the anthropological gaze upon a phenomenon that not only has colonial roots but that also connects Tuvaluans to a world of meanings that I partly inhabit. In effect, there was a pre-established commonality that would not have been available had I chosen to focus on some other aspects of Tuvaluan life. Such an equivalence can breed assumptions on both sides of ethnographic relationships. To a greater degree than is common in fieldwork outside one's own society, the subjects of my research took for granted that I broadly held their beliefs.

My position was a privileged one in some ways but also complicated by this sense of overlap. I received hospitality from a number of administrators and pastors of the Tuvalu Church,<sup>1</sup> and was granted access to Church records. My fieldwork was dependent on the cooperation of many Tuvaluan Christians. Yet I did not feel that the situation obliged me to say only 'nice' things about their society and religion. Alovaka Maui, my mentor and the church general secretary, clearly did not expect it. He explicitly told me that at times I would see the 'bad' side of the church and he never pretended that all was sweetness and light among his charges. I took him at his word. I have made statements, especially in my dissertation (Goldsmith 1989), that could be construed as critical of the Tuvalu Church and its members, officers and policies. Like other observers of similar village-based societies, for example, I saw ample evidence that communitarian church regimes are uneasy about individual religious freedom of expression. Members face enormous pressures to remain within the accepted religious dispensation, pressures which to many non-Tuvaluans would seem oppressive and even dictatorial. Not surprisingly, a certain proportion of Tuvaluans feel the same way. One implication of this all-or-nothing attitude to religious orthodoxy had methodological consequences for me: anything less than wholehearted support for the Church might be interpreted as antagonism.

In academic terms, however, my intentions were far from antagonistic to the Tuvalu Church. Whether or not my research could be construed as

a matter of disinterested analysis, I had an overwhelmingly sympathetic approach to the views and practices of my Tuvaluan acquaintances. And yet researchers can never predict or legislate their own or their work's reception. It is possible to read my work in ways that were not intended, for example, to find ways of exploiting the Tuvalu Church's authority or of reducing its influence. I would be foolish to think that the information I provided could not be put to such a use, even though I think it highly unlikely. The dilemma that data presented from seemingly innocent motives can be turned to other ends is common in anthropological research and it helps to account for the frequency with which individuals and locales are disguised or made anonymous in ethnographic descriptions. Occasionally, in reporting my own research, I have resorted to such practices when the situation demanded; but often it would have been a waste of time, since the people and communities concerned were and still are so easily identifiable.

I cannot pretend to complete neutrality. It is impossible to avoid making judgements in social science, even when operating at a level that is supposedly objective and value-free—a claim that I would certainly never make for my own work. And where such claims are made, they rarely stand up. The evaluative dimension of social science is even more than usually salient in discussions of religion precisely because the 'scientific' attitude predisposes secular researchers to question the validity (though not necessarily the reality) of religious beliefs. Thus, social scientists are able to study religion successfully, according to the tenets of the dominant conception of positivist social science, *provided they 'bracket' the central assumptions of the religious world-view as, at best, incidental to their purpose*. This bracketing amounts to scepticism, which is itself an attitude resulting from the secularisation of modern Western society and the rise to prominence of certain nonreligious philosophical views. But by treating the content of beliefs as secondary, social scientists may quite unconsciously substitute one set of values for another. In my own research, on the other hand, I have tried to foreground the values of critique, inquiry and relativism that are central to my version of modern Western social science—even though I am aware that relativism in particular has been much in dispute in recent years (e.g. Jarvie 1984, Bloom 1987, Winant 1991, Lawson 1995).

What I have written about the Tuvalu Church and its officers, then, might not always accord with the images they have of themselves and their work. Again, this raises the question of the researcher's 'right' to construct

such interpretations. A complicating factor, but also possibly a saving grace, is the fact that people's images, and especially their reputations, are the subject of dispute among themselves.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, such conflict relieves the dilemma by making it general and part of the human condition, not exclusively an issue for cross-cultural researchers. But it also makes the issue more personally and politically demanding for each ethnographer.

*Many are called but few are chosen*

My decision to undertake research with a focus on religion reflected two sets of influences. The first was my initial experience of fieldwork in Western Samoa among a community of Tokelau Islanders, in 1971. This venture was an exceedingly minor part of a much larger project, the Tokelau Islands Migrant Study, the aim of which was to integrate epidemiological and anthropological data on Tokelau populations in the home atolls and in New Zealand, the colonial power.<sup>3</sup> Of the three Tokelau atoll communities, one (Atafu) is almost totally Protestant, one (Nukunonu) is almost totally Roman Catholic, and the third (Fakaofu) has a Protestant majority and Catholic minority. All were missionised from Samoa, and the London Missionary Society was the body that had implanted Protestantism. Its Samoan adherents later attained autonomy as the Christian Congregational Church of Samoa (CCCS), of which the Tokelau parishes at Atafu and Fakaofu formed a separate district at the time of my fieldwork. Tokelauans living in Samoa therefore have powerful ties to the churches there. While staying at Lotopa near Apia, I attended services at the local CCCS church every Sunday with my host family. Though I did not make their participation in church activities a major focus of my research, I was alerted to the importance of Christianity in a present-day Polynesian society.

The second major influence was my reading of the literature on traditional Polynesian societies—or, rather, my reaction to it. Some of this material was based on reconstruction from historical and archaeological evidence, some of it on ethnographic fieldwork done in the twentieth century. Almost all of it regarded the only religions worth describing as those existing before the arrival of Christianity, even though the societies in question had generally been missionised for decades or were in the process of being converted at the time of the research. The best known example of the latter was Tikopia, where Raymond Firth was able to collect information

on the pagan ritual cycle in 1928–29 as it appeared to be entering its phase of final dissolution (Firth 1940, 1967). What set his ethnographic work apart from most was not just the sheer volume of excellent material collected on an existing traditional religion but also Firth's sensitivity to the inroads that Christianity was making upon it. His work, however, was the exception that proved the rule, and even he did not treat Tikopian Christianity as a major topic in its own right until late in his career (Firth 1970).

I am not claiming, by the way, that my burgeoning interest in Christianity as a topic for anthropological study was startlingly original. There is a huge ethnographic, sociological and historical literature on the Pacific alone dealing with Christianity as a major or minor issue. Mostly, like Firth's work on Tikopia, it has arisen out of other research interests. But since the 1970s it has become a substantial focus for a number of researchers, a move augmented by the landmark monographs published by members of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (Boutilier, Hughes and Tiffany 1978; Barker 1990).

Unconsciously in tune with this particular *zeitgeist*, I was keen to shed the antiquarian obsessions of religious research in Polynesia. My topic had to be religion as practised in a contemporary Polynesian society, which perforce meant Christianity. Embarking on my own doctoral project, the question was: 'where?' It would be helpful if a new fieldsite had some points of comparison or historical ties to Tokelau and Samoa. A number of Polynesian societies had been missionised by the LMS and similar bodies and these were the ones where I focused my attention. Tuvalu was near the top of the list but it became my final choice by good fortune. I met Alovaka Maui, who had come to New Zealand for graduate studies in theology, and his invitation settled the matter (Goldsmith 1989:14; 1996).

### *The remains of a religious upbringing*

To say that my interest in Polynesian Christianity is anthropological is not to say that it is exclusively 'academic'. Prior religious experiences necessarily had a bearing on my outlook and work. I had been born in London and reared in a loosely Anglican environment because that was the religion of my Anglo-Welsh mother and her relations.<sup>4</sup> For those unfamiliar with the Church of England, it has the reputation of being a somewhat 'establishment' Protestant denomination, not noted for zealotry, but rather for its placid

acceptance of the status quo and for its ties to the traditional rulers of British society, especially the monarchy. Following the dictates of that Church, I was baptised and christened at an age when I knew nothing about the meaning of the rituals concerned. My father, a Pole who had lost his family in the Second World War, adopted the undemanding religious routines of his affines. Even his decision to pursue a new-found teaching career in Canada did not enable us to escape the tradition. His background and qualifications suited him best for a position at a private school with Anglican values in Vancouver where, being a member of staff, he could enrol his sons for free. An educational philosophy that attempted to implant British virtues into the scions of ill-gotten British Columbian fortunes entailed daily chapel for most pupils (though liberalisation had taken root, and 'Jews and RCs' were not only allowed but expected to worship according to their own dictates). Nevertheless, in every respect other than regular chapel and occasional church attendance, my family was about as non-religious as it is possible to be while still retaining ties to a church. Had I suffered a crisis of faith at any time I am sure my parents would have allowed me to follow my conscience, but our commitment was so flexible that there was little to rebel against.

Moving with my family to New Zealand at the onset of adolescence, I was on the verge of translating my inchoate religious doubts into apathy, but my brother and I continued to tag along to church during term time as reluctant appendages to the boarding establishment at New Plymouth Boys High School. At the age of fourteen, however, I abandoned any commitment to religious practice. The ritual of confirmation, which I went through at that time, since it seemed to be socially required, confirmed little for me except the agnosticism that has remained with me ever since.

'Agnosticism' is perhaps not a wholly accurate term because it places too much weight on my own set of beliefs (which are effectively atheist). An anthropological willingness to entertain other people's points of view is closer to the attitude I am trying to express. Complementing this was the fact that I had been steeped in the institutional significance of religion from an early age, an awareness of which was reawakened by the study of anthropology. Together, these factors drew me into the church on Funafuti one Sunday in late 1978, seven years after my initial acquaintance with Polynesian Christianity in Western Samoa and fourteen years after I thought I had discarded religion altogether.

*Understanding or believing?*

The question arises, however: can my perspective lead to real insight about religion? To put it another way, is my (or any other ethnographer's) lack of belief compatible with a 'true' understanding of the phenomenon under investigation?<sup>5</sup> There is a salutary parallel in the defensive reactions often aroused by the sociological study of scientific knowledge. In both cases, I maintain, the outsider who suspends judgement as to a phenomenon's 'truth' while investigating its *meanings* is able to ask important questions.

Not surprisingly, the matter has come to philosophers' attention. Alasdair MacIntyre (1970), for example, has asked the question I posed above but in reverse: 'Is understanding religion compatible with believing?' The understanding he refers to is that which an outsider or sceptic would need in order to 'make sense of', say, a belief in the existence and omnipotence of God, even if only to be able to refute the claims made on behalf of God by a believer. His answer is negative:

If I am right, understanding Christianity is incompatible with believing in it, not because Christianity is vulnerable to sceptical objections, but because its peculiar invulnerability belongs to it as a form of belief which has lost the social context which once made it comprehensible (MacIntyre 1970:76).

Extrapolating from this view, it is the task of the anthropologist or historian, practising a discipline that originated in the secularisation of inquiry, to recreate a social context that makes sense of a particular belief-system, even though he or she may not (and in fact cannot) share the beliefs concerned. MacIntyre's point is that whenever the routine certainty of knowing something is lost, or becomes impeded by the process of social change, understanding of another kind becomes possible (though by no means certain). His argument bears more than a passing resemblance to ethnomethodology's questioning of the taken-for-granted nature of social reality but, instead of focusing on the subtleties of micro-social rule-following, MacIntyre highlights broad cultural differences and macro-historical change. In respect of culture, Evans-Pritchard's classic study of Azande witchcraft (1937) seems to have become canonical, not just for MacIntyre but in discussions of the rationality of non-Western religion generally (e.g. Winch 1958, Wilson 1970). In respect of history, MacIntyre alludes to the changes that have occurred in Western society since medieval times, when 'the internal incoherences in Christian concepts' were 'an incentive to enquiry

but not a ground for disbelief' (MacIntyre 1970:73). Tuvalu exemplifies both dimensions of difference: a non-'Western' culture (though very much influenced by 'Western' ideas) and a non-secular social context (though increasingly bound up in the same historical developments that produced secularisation). If so, then it is likely that most Tuvaluans do not share my view of what it means to understand their religion in anthropological terms, but that some Tuvaluans may do. This distinction breaks up the stereotype of monolithic cultural differences and establishes the possibility of subtler communication within ethnographic relationships.

This communication may have been enhanced by the fact that I am able to recapture a sense of what religious belief means through my own early experiences. Not only have I no wish to expunge the Anglicanism of my childhood, I do not think it is possible to ignore the fact that Christianity is one of the factors that have shaped me. The influence is more than my private individual concern. Even supposedly secular branches of modern Western knowledge, including anthropology and history, are informed by religion. To react against something, as many social scientists have done with religion, is in a sense to be defined by it. Interestingly, I have found, on mentioning the topic of this research, that a few of my academic colleagues express discomfort. Since they exclude the serious study of Christianity from the domain of social science, they assume that I must have a hidden agenda—that I must be either 'for' or 'against', bent on either apology or demystification. If they suspect the former, in particular, they seem to need extra reassurance about my motives. I have often wondered if the same attitude would arise if I said I were studying something properly 'anthropological', like animism, or a world religion other than Christianity.

The fact that I had a childhood influenced, however patchily, by a version of Christianity undoubtedly affected my research in Tuvalu. I am inclined to think it gave me a headstart in learning the etiquette of behaviour in church and in understanding certain concepts such as 'communion' and 'baptism'. On the other hand, someone to whom these practices were unfamiliar might have produced a better analysis by not taking them for granted. Still, everyone comes to fieldwork with preconceptions and blinkers. It is overly simplistic to say that our capacity to bracket them is strengthened by our academic training because they are in part the outcome of that background. My world view has certain merits, I would argue; but I am also compelled to voice my respect for, and indebtedness to, the work



of some scholars of religion in the Pacific whose commitment is explicitly Christian, such as Charles Forman (1982, 1985, 1986), John Garrett (1974, 1982, 1992) and Alan Tippett (1971).

My religious background had another consequence for my research. I am sure that my initial reception in Tuvalu Church circles was helped by the fact that I was raised as a Protestant, a fact that emerged during the repeated and inevitable inquiries into my background.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this raises the ethical question again. Most of the Tuvaluans who knew me or knew of me must have supposed that I was a believing Christian. After all, I attended church services, lived in the church compound and was often seen in the company of people employed in the work of the church. Some Tuvaluans even thought that I was a missionary, judging by one or two comments made in my presence or reported back to me. Again, this supposition was understandable, since the Tuvalu Church has attracted visiting and resident *palagi* missionaries at various times. Like me, they stayed with pastors, checked church records and made visits to the outer islands of the archipelago.

My participation in church activities had one self-imposed limit. I did not take part in Holy Communion, which was celebrated separately at the end of one Sunday morning service each month. Since my interest in forms of worship was mainly concerned with social forms, I did not feel entitled to participate in a rite that I knew to be predicated on being able to claim a particular spiritual state, particularly as my fieldwork did not require me to do so. I did not feel the same diffidence about attending the main church services as such. In most Christian denominations, these have always been open to those motivated by curiosity, intellectual or otherwise. While I was the only ethnographer present, as far as I know, I was not the only person to jot notes during sermons. Attendance was also a social act of courtesy towards my hosts and living as I did with church families, it would have been a mark of discourtesy *not* to attend. I am inclined to think that similar motives of duty lay behind the presence of many members of the *kau lotu* 'congregation, group of worshippers'. Attendance covers a multitude of sins. Holy Communion, on the other hand, is open only to those of 'pure heart and humble mind', to use the Anglican phrase. At yet another level, this personal sense of a rule governing my behaviour replicated the distinct social boundary between *kau lotu* and *ekaleesia* 'body of communicants', which is central to the organisation of the church and illustrative of the tensions it

can produce within society. In other words, I felt that I could be a member of the congregation in good conscience, even if not a member of the church in a state of grace.

This quasi-membership, however, highlighted a feature of the situation that is peculiar to societies like Tuvalu, more overtly Christian than the one I come from and very different from the circles in which I normally mix. Insulated until recently from most of the secularising influences that have shaped contemporary New Zealand, Tuvaluans in my experience take an adherence to Christianity for granted, unless the person in question demonstrates a decisive commitment to the contrary. It is interesting to note from census records that, while a few Tuvaluans aligned themselves with minority denominations, almost none deny any religious affiliation at all. In the 1979 census one resident, a man on Nui, denied having a religion at all and only one other, a Nukulaelae man, refused to answer the question concerning affiliation (McRae and Iosia 1980:194). By the time of the 1991 census (Government of Tuvalu 1992:22), no one actually refused to state his or her religion, though twelve said they had none (all but one of whom were living on the most urbanised island, Funafuti) and 10 people on Nui and Nukulaelae did not state a religion or had none recorded by the enumerator. My point is that in Tuvalu religious adherence is clearly still an important component of social identity, and the fact that I slotted into this system of classification helped to 'place' me. It may also have hindered me in other respects, of course, by aligning me with the dominant church, even though I managed to have fruitful conversations with a few people in minority religions, such as SDA and Baha'i.

Should I have made my anthropological interest in religion clear? The answer is that I did, as often as I felt it necessary. I did not announce who I was and what I was doing incessantly, in all situations, or to every passing acquaintance. Alovaka Maui knew the nature of my research. But I am equally sure that many Tuvaluans, if they took any interest in my presence whatsoever, never abandoned the misperceptions that I have already referred to. For me to have laboured the point would have been protesting too much. I do not feel that I was working under false pretences. I only know that where I and most Tuvaluans were coming from was so far apart on this issue that total transparency was impossible.

I am not trying to absolve myself of ethical responsibility for many 'sins' of omission and commission in the course of my research. That responsibility

continues into the present, and this essay is just another way of addressing it. I undertook fieldwork with the goal of treating a certain constellation of beliefs and practices seriously. To do so does not require subscribing uncritically to the beliefs and practices in question but, for an ethnographer, it does entail going along with them in order to find out what they might be like. As John Stuart Mill wrote of Coleridge's attitude to philosophy and religion, 'the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for' (Mill 1859:394). Studying such matters properly carries the 'risk' of conversion. Indeed, there have been aspects of my life that have been changed forever by fieldwork in Tuvalu. Amongst other things, I am able to understand more of the emotions stirred and sometimes satisfied by religious language, I can recall the power of fellowship between hosts and guests, and I can empathise with those who use ritual as a bulwark against life's hardships and sorrows. On matters of doctrine, however, fieldwork on Christianity left me with my anthropological 'faith' intact.

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## Notes

1. The Tuvalu Church, now more often referred to officially as the Tuvalu Christian Church (*Ekalesia Kerisiano Tuvalu*), is the local successor of the London Missionary Society, which began work in Tuvalu in 1865. I will use the shorter form in this essay, partly for convenience and partly because that was the standard label during the most intensive part of my research. In numerical terms, the older name is still accurate. Despite the efforts of competing 'sects'—such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i, Roman Catholicism, and even an offshoot of Islam (Ahmadya)—the Tuvalu Church has been overwhelmingly dominant, claiming the allegiance of 90–95 per cent of the population (Goldsmith 1989:202–205). The 1979 Census put the figures as high as 97 per cent (McRae and Iosia 1980) and it was still 92 per cent in the 1991 census (Government of Tuvalu 1992:12).

2. The issues surrounding the politics of representing intra-cultural opposition and resistance to hegemonic depictions of social harmony have been explored by another ethnographer of Tuvaluan society, Niko Besnier (1996), who worked mainly on the smallest and southernmost atoll, Nukulaelae.

3. The TIMS project was the subject of an extensive series of publications. Most readers of this journal would find greatest interest in the numerous anthropological and ethnohistorical works by Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman. The best introduction to the overall project, however, is Wessen (1992).

4. To be more precise: the family denomination was 'Church of England in Wales', a subtle yet fiercely proclaimed distinction.

5. Claude Stipe (1980) has provided another perspective on the issues raised in the preceding paragraphs. He accuses most anthropologists of being hostile to Christianity, particularly to missionaries working in the same ethnographic areas. There is an element of truth in this accusation, as there is in the view that anthropologists are often less relativistic about Christianity than about non-Western religions. Stipe is unjustified, however, in the inferences (1980:167) that atheism and agnosticism are invariably the basis of this hostility (I suspect that it is often the other way around) and that anthropologists are uninterested in the *meaning* of religious belief, Christian and otherwise. Stipe's argument is valid only if (a) atheism and agnosticism entail hostility and if (b) the description of meanings without belief in the veracity of those meanings is meaningless. I think that an examination of my personal position undermines the first assertion and that the huge anthropological literature on religion and world-view flatly contradicts the second. I have another problem with Stipe's essay. While it proceeds from a position of religious commitment, he never actually states what that position is.

6. True, some British 'separated brethren' of the sort who missionised Samoa and Tuvalu accused Anglicanism of being tainted with 'papisty'. If such a view lingers in the Pacific, the Tuvaluans I encountered were polite enough to skirt around that particular swamp of doctrinal dispute.

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