

# Malietoa, Williams and Samoa's Embrace of Christianity

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IN 1830, JOHN WILLIAMS OF THE LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY (LMS) ARRIVED IN Samoa in his schooner, the missionary vessel *Messenger of Peace*, also known as the *Olive Branch*, the building of which he had undertaken and supervised at his station in Rarotonga. His Samoan guide, Fauea, who was hitching a ride home with his wife and family after 11 years in Tonga, guided Williams and the ship to Sapapali'i, on the eastern side of Savai'i. This was the home of Malietoa Vainu'upo,<sup>1</sup> who was just one battle away from securing for himself the last of four titles<sup>2</sup> that together would confer on him the mantle of Tafa'ifa, an honorific commanding great respect in Samoa.<sup>3</sup> Malietoa and his younger brother Taimalelagi showed hospitality to Williams and his missionary companion Charles Barff, and when these two departed after a few days, the eight Polynesian teachers<sup>4</sup> and their families who had accompanied them on the *Messenger of Peace* were left under Malietoa's protection. Williams returned in 1832 and twice in 1838–39. It was from Samoa that Williams sailed to his death in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), and it was to Samoa that his purported remains were returned.<sup>5</sup>

The names of Williams and Malietoa, missionary martyr and missionary protector, are inextricably linked in the history of Samoa from 1830. Although A. Harold Wood states that 'Nothing can deprive John Williams of the honour to

<sup>1</sup> Also sometimes written Vai'inupo or Va'anupo. The spelling preferred by the Malietoa family and by Samoan historians such as Malama Meleisea and Morgan Tuimaleali'i fano is the version used in this paper. Curiously, Meleisea uses 'Vaiinupo' in Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa* (Suva 1987) despite a detailed footnote in the same work in favour of 'Vainu'upo' (ibid., fn. 7, 238–9).

<sup>2</sup> Tui Atua, Tui A'ana, Gatoaitete, Tamasoali'i.

<sup>3</sup> Malama Meleisea, *Change and Adaptations in Western Samoa* (np 1992), 18. Gilson describes the holder of the Tafa'ifa as 'the highest-ranking and most sanctified chief in Samoa', R.P. Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900: the politics of a multicultural society* (Melbourne 1970), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Moia (married with three children) and Boti (single) from Huahine, Taata (married), Umia (married) and Arue (single) from Raiatea; Taihaere (married with five children) from Borabora; and Rake (married with two children) and Tuava (married) from Aitutake. John Williams and Charles Barff, 'A Journal of a Voyage undertaken for the Purpose of Introducing Christianity among the Fejees and Samoas', CWM South Seas Journals, Box 6 1827–1830, School of Oriental and African Studies, London [hereinafter SOAS].

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Williams' death and interpretations of its significance, see Jane Samson, 'Landscape of faith: British missionary tourism in the South Pacific', in Jamie S. Scott and Gareth Griffiths (eds), *Mixed Messages: materiality, textuality, missions* (Basingstoke 2005), 89–109.

which his pioneering work in Samoa entitled him',<sup>6</sup> there are several aspects of this story that reward further inquiry. The roles of these important and influential men were more limited and less clear than is often assumed, and the context in which they played their parts was more complex. This paper looks at the mutually beneficial relationship between Malietoa and Williams and at the dissatisfaction and only grudging appreciation felt by later missionaries regarding Malietoa's contribution. Others have recognised that Christianity existed in Samoa before 1830,<sup>7</sup> but this paper goes further and implicitly questions the central importance of Malietoa and Williams in the conversion of Samoa. It looks again at Malietoa's relationship with the teachers, with Williams, and with the missionaries who followed Williams. It looks also at the tangled literature on Malietoa's conversion. Finally, this paper briefly discusses the Samoan embrace of Christianity in the context of conversion elsewhere in the South Pacific, with particular reference to New Zealand.

The largest uncertainties in this tale follow from the fact that Malietoa and the other Polynesian participants did not write books or reports. We are dependent on those who did, and these, for the most part, were Western missionaries. When we read the letters these men (and occasionally their wives) wrote to the LMS directors in London, questions inevitably arise concerning the voices being represented, the intention of the authors, and the nature of the audience. The early documents often complicate, clarify or confirm interpretations offered in later secondary texts, including those written by Polynesian researchers. This article draws on early sources (some little used), as well as certain secondary sources to inform a new perspective on Malietoa's relationship with the teachers, Williams and later missionaries; Malietoa's conversion; and the place of the Samoan experience in the wider debate over conversion in Polynesia.

### *Malietoa Welcomes Williams: Samoa in 1830*

Williams spent a total of less than a month in Samoa in 1830 and 1832, and he and Malietoa met only a few times. As Williams describes in his *Missionary Enterprises* and journals, the meetings were cordial, and Malietoa agreed from the first to protect the missionary teachers whom Williams planned to leave in Samoa. Why was the welcome so warm and ready? Several factors contributed, including prior encounters between Samoans and Europeans, prior knowledge of Christianity among Samoans, a convenient Samoan legend, and Samoan familiarity with Western trade goods.

In an 1830 letter to the LMS, Williams claimed that 'no European had been on shore [in Savai'i] before',<sup>8</sup> but this assertion was the result of enthusiasm rather than fact (as was his earlier claim to have discovered Rarotonga).

<sup>6</sup> A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, vol. 1: *Tonga, Samoa* (Melbourne 1975), 266.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Derek Freeman, A. Harold Wood, Rhys Richards and Niel Gunson, all cited later.

<sup>8</sup> John Williams to the Secretary, LMS, London, 21 October 1830, South Seas Letters, SOAS.

When Williams and Barff visited the nearby islet of Apolima on his way to Savai'i in 1830, he was approached by John Wright, a European resident, and accepted his offer to serve as a translator. Wright told Williams that Malietoa was away fighting in Upolu.<sup>9</sup> Samoans had already encountered Europeans, and many already knew something about Christianity. There had been occasional visits from exploring expeditions, whalers and other sea-borne travellers, and local Christian cults existed, led by shipwrecked sailors and Samoans who had learned about Christianity in Tonga and elsewhere. The best-known of these is the Siovili cult, led by a Samoan, Siovili, or Joe Gimlet, who had travelled from Samoa to Tonga in the 1820s and then on with the trader (and missionary's son) Captain Samuel Henry to Tahiti, where the anti-missionary *mamaia* cult was already under way. Derek Freeman notes that Malietoa was 'a bitter opponent of Siovili'.<sup>10</sup> In a public meeting in 1832, Malietoa asked Williams what he thought about the cult leader; Williams replied that Siovili had never been guided by a missionary and that he was 'an ignorant and wicked man'.<sup>11</sup>

These essentially indigenous developments also included a more conventional Christian community of Tongans and Samoans living on Savai'i before Williams arrived. Again, the connection with Tonga — a 'mere' 600 miles (over 900 kilometres) away and with profound historical and cultural links to Samoa — was vital. Christianity in Tonga was predominantly Wesleyan, and so the first 'mainstream' church in Samoa was the *lotu toga*, the Tongan church. It was established by Saiva'aia, a Samoan chief who had travelled to Tonga, embraced Christianity and, in 1828 or 1829, returned with some Tongan adherents in a double canoe to Savai'i, where they persuaded two villages (Tafua and Saleleloga) to accept Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Malietoa was aware of these developments; Williams, describing his first meeting with Malietoa, reports that the chief 'professed to be highly delighted, and said that he had heard of the *lotu*, and being desirous of instruction, was truly glad that we had come to impart it'.<sup>13</sup> Fauea's wife was a Christian, and Fauea himself, although he 'had made no public profession of Christianity in Tonga . . . was decidedly friendly to the *lotu*'.<sup>14</sup> Rhys Richards, drawing on whaling records, emphasises the 'high indigenous content' involved in the transition of Samoans towards Christianity, and he suggests that 'over a third of the Samoans had already decided to pray to the Christian God, rather than the old ones, before the arrival of John Williams . . . in 1830'.<sup>15</sup> This figure may be high, but a variety of people — Polynesian travellers,

<sup>9</sup> Williams and Barff, 'A Journal of a Voyage undertaken for the Purpose of Introducing Christianity among the Fejees and Samoas'. Wright is also mentioned in John Williams, *Missionary Enterprises* (London 1838), 338.

<sup>10</sup> J.D. Freeman, 'The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult: an episode in the religious history of early Samoa', in J.D. Freeman and W.R. Geddes (eds), *Anthropology in the South Seas: essays presented to H.D. Skinner* (New Plymouth 1959), 185–200.

<sup>11</sup> John Williams, South Seas Journals, Box 7, 'Narrative of a Voyage performed in the missionary schooner Olive Branch by J. Williams, 1832', SOAS.

<sup>12</sup> A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, vol. 1, 257.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 336.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>15</sup> Rhys Richards, 'The decision to *lotu*: new perspectives from the whaling records on the sources and spread of Christianity in Samoa', *Pacific Studies*, 17:1 (1994), 29–43.

ship captains and crews, and others — introduced various forms of Christianity to Samoa in the period before Williams arrived.

The stage was already set for the missionaries in another way. Malama Meleisea recounts the well-known Samoan legend of the goddess Nafanua as follows:

After Nafanua had conquered her enemies, she had control over all political authority in Samoa, and she gave the *malo* (the authority of conquerors) to the district of A'ana and its allies. When Malietoa came from his village of Sapapali'i in Savai'i to ask her for a share of the *malo*, Nafanua told him that he would have to wait for his turn, and that it would eventually come from heaven.<sup>16</sup>

The coming of European ships from over the horizon, and especially the *Messenger of Peace*, looking for Malietoa in particular, came to be seen in Samoa as the fulfilment of this prophesy. To Malietoa Vainu'upo, it must have seemed so, but it presented him with an interesting dilemma. In a way, he was beholden to Nafanua, but his embrace of Christianity also implied a rejection of the old gods. Of course, this may not have troubled him; Peter Hempenstall's discussion of Derek Freeman's work makes it clear that the 'hybrid' character of Samoan Christianity has long been recognised, and elements of the old tradition persist to this day.<sup>17</sup> Malietoa did embrace Christianity in 1832, but this was in some respects a partial conversion, and Malietoa 'was slow to forsake his gods'.<sup>18</sup> The challenge inherent in trying to understand how people thought in such circumstances brings to mind the exchanges between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere, among others, over how to understand indigenous and European thinking about Captain Cook in Hawai'i.<sup>19</sup>

Samoans were also familiar with trade goods, as was made clear when the *Messenger of Peace* arrived at Savai'i and was met by Malietoa's brother, Taimalelagi. Williams' friend and early biographer Ebenezer Prout wrote that Taimalelagi,

with a multitude of natives, immediately boarded the vessel, and, having learned her errand, he manifested great delight, and instantly dispatched a messenger for his brother. The chiefs and others had brought off articles of barter: but, on hearing who the visitors were, they unladed their canoes, and, having covered the deck with pigs and produce, resolutely refused any remuneration.<sup>20</sup>

The readiness to barter and then to change the basis of this interaction suggests a sophisticated routine not unlike the traditions associated with reciprocity and gift-giving in traditional (and current) Samoan culture; indeed, Williams

<sup>16</sup> Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Hempenstall, "'On missionaries and cultural change in Samoa": Derek Freeman preparing for a "heretical" life', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 39:2 (2004), 241–50.

<sup>18</sup> Jocelyn Linnekin, 'New political orders', in Donald Denoon (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (Cambridge 1997), 196.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *How 'Natives' Think About Captain Cook, For Example* (Chicago 1995); Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Ebenezer Prout, *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend John Williams, Missionary of Polynesia* (London 1843), 217.

and Barff received crucial advice from the teachers and Fauea on how to distribute gifts to Malietoa and Taimelalagi.<sup>21</sup> Niel Gunson has noted that, by the time of Kotzebue's visit in 1824, '[Samoa] was already locked into the island trading network supplying sennit to sandalwooders and sealers and food suppliers to whalers'.<sup>22</sup> Items such as blue beads, metal tools and firearms were prized.<sup>23</sup> Richards observes that whalers needed supplies; they stopped at Samoa to barter and trade in the 1820s, and such encounters were relatively routine by 1830. When Williams and Barff landed there, many Samoans were already aware of Europeans, Western goods, Christianity and the missionaries, and this produced a high level of interest in their arrival.

The possibility that Malietoa might not be especially attentive to the teachers had worried Williams and Barff. When they were about to leave Samoa in 1830, Malietoa made it plain that he wanted a blunderbuss that was on board their ship; the missionaries wrote in their journal that 'He was very earnest in his request and it was thought prudent to comply hoping it would induce him to be more kind to the native teachers we had left under his care.' Williams believed that Malietoa wanted control over the teachers in order 'to give him a kind of supremacy over the whole of the Islands',<sup>24</sup> and this has been echoed by more recent commentators. Malietoa, as a result of his embrace of Williams, was now personally identified with the *lotu taiti* (the Tahitian church) and the LMS. This was 'a new source of sacred power', Meleisea suggests, that Malietoa apparently 'intended to monopolise'.<sup>25</sup> Within the traditional context Malietoa already enjoyed high status, but the context was changing, absorbing new elements, both material and spiritual, and there was competition for teachers and missionaries and for access to European goods. The original eight teachers were shared by Malietoa and Taimalelagi; when other chiefs asked for missionaries, they were rebuffed, and their frustration was compounded by Williams' long absence after 1832 and by the LMS directors' delay in sending resident missionaries to Samoa — the first group arrived in 1836.

The monopoly that Malietoa enjoyed was limited to the LMS and could be bypassed. Some chiefs looked to Tonga and in 1835 the Wesleyan missionary Peter Turner arrived, responding to entreaties from Tuinaula, one of the *matai* whose request for a missionary Malietoa had refused. When Turner arrived from Tonga with his wife and five teachers, he found a significant population of adherents to the *lotu toga*, as mentioned above, and he was 'inundated with requests for teachers'.<sup>26</sup> Turner left in 1839 in an arrangement to bring an end to an angry territorial dispute between the LMS and the Wesleyan missions that

<sup>21</sup> Williams and Barff, 'A Journal of a Voyage undertaken for the Purpose of Introducing Christianity among the Fejees and Samoas', entry for 23 July 1830.

<sup>22</sup> Niel Gunson (ed.), *The Dalton Journal: two whaling voyages to the South Seas 1823–1829*, with 'Introduction' and 'Dr. William Dalton: a memoir' ([Canberra] 1990), 11.

<sup>23</sup> See Gunson, *The Dalton Journal*, 78–9 (esp. fn. 85) for a discussion of blue beads as trade goods.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 'Narrative of a Voyage'; and Richard Moyle (ed.), *The Samoan Journals of John Williams 1830 and 1832* (Canberra 1984), 123.

<sup>25</sup> Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, 272.

was based on Williams' claim that the Wesleyan missionary Nathaniel Turner and he had agreed in Tonga in 1830 to divide the field: Samoa being left to the LMS and Fiji to the Wesleyans. There is no evidence to support Williams' claim.<sup>27</sup> Despite Peter Turner's departure, the *lotu toga* continued to have adherents and Tongan teachers. In 1845, a Roman Catholic mission entered the country; the Wesleyan mission returned in 1855, and the earliest of the Mormon missionaries arrived in 1862.

The pain caused by Turner's departure is apparent in a letter written by the LMS missionary William Harbutt in 1842, as is the paradoxical hostility to Turner (on the one hand) and assertion of ecumenical values (on the other):

The mischiefs resulting from the temporary residence of Messrs Turner and Wilson, tending as it did to divide the minds of the Natives, continue with but little abatement. Oh it is painful to behold many resolutely continuing to reject the assistance which we proffer simply because the name we bear is not that of another Individual — I do not mean a denominational distinction for that we have studiously avoided, teaching them that all true Christians are one in Christ Jesus. . . . [W]e are still hoping that thro' the blessings of Jehovah a reconciliation may be effected.<sup>28</sup>

Malietao's attempt to maintain a monopoly over the early LMS teachers led other *matai* to look to the Wesleyans, and this, in turn, spurred inter-denominational rivalry. Other *matai* felt no obligation to follow Malietao in his support of the LMS.

### *Malietao's Conversion: Three Versions*

Many accounts in the secondary literature concerning Malietao's conversion are brief and vaguely speculate about his baptism and naming. Fa'afouina Iofi notes that Malietao adopted the name 'Tavita' when he accepted Christianity;<sup>29</sup> Gilson writes, 'Near the end of his career Vai'inupo . . . had not become a church member', adding the footnote, 'But he had taken a Christian name, Tavita . . . and had presumably been baptized'.<sup>30</sup> In his general history of Samoa, Augustin Krämer writes that Malietao 'received the name Tavita . . . in baptism', adding that he 'very influentially assisted in the introduction of Christianity'.<sup>31</sup> A more interesting variation comes from Malama Meleisea who, in his discussion of the spelling of 'Vainu'upo', writes that 'Whatever the right spelling is, the name connotes "time of darkness" — fa'a-nu'u-po — a phrase

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account, see Wood, *Overseas Missions*.

<sup>28</sup> William Harbutt to Arthur Tidman, Foreign Secretary, LMS, 24 January 1842, South Seas Letters 15/5/A, SOAS.

<sup>29</sup> Fa'afouina Iofi, 'Samoa cultural values and Christian thought: an attempt to relate Samoan traditional values to Christian understanding', PhD thesis, School of Theology at Claremont (Claremont 1980), 20. University of Michigan Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, m/f # 8018692.

<sup>30</sup> Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, 107 and fn.

<sup>31</sup> Augustin Krämer, *The Samoa Islands* (Auckland 1994), vol. 1, 275.

which Samoans now use to refer to the pre-Christian era. This may be the reason why Malietoa changed his personal name, taking the Christian name Tavita.<sup>32</sup> If Malietoa was baptised, the event probably took place in 1832, prior to the missionaries' 1837 rule that 'no person be allowed to pray in public or admitted as candidates for Baptism who have more than one wife'.<sup>33</sup> In Tonga, the missionaries gave Christian names to converts at baptism.<sup>34</sup> The speculative character of these accounts reflects the lack of a written record. The lack of any mention of Malietoa's baptism in Williams' accounts might suggest that Williams did not baptise him, but it also might reflect the fact that the significance of baptism had been undermined by the cults and was in this early period less noteworthy.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary or early versions of Malietoa's conversion are also interesting in their diversity, offering more detail than is elsewhere available concerning his baptism, but not much more clarity, as a survey of the key works by Prout, Barff and Williams himself indicates. According to Prout, when Williams returned to Savai'i in 1832, he received a jubilant welcome, and the teachers told him what had happened in his absence. Prout's summary of these stories indicates that the provisions left for them by Williams and Barff in 1830 soon dwindled and, with Malietoa and most of the men away fighting in Upolu, the teachers felt neglected. Worse, an epidemic among the remaining Samoans was blamed on them, and only through the charity of some of the women were their health and well-being revived. During a lull in the fighting, some of the warriors returned, including the *matai* Tuiano and one of Malietoa's sons, who declared their commitment to the new religion. 'These important adhesions', the teachers reported, 'attracted general attention, and eminently facilitated the good work'.<sup>36</sup> When Malietoa resumed the war, three of the teachers, Boti, Moia and Taihaere followed him to Upolu. They were unable to influence Malietoa to stop the fighting, but they impressed others, and upon their return to Savai'i they took their message beyond Sapapali'i. Meanwhile, the war ended, and a mass slaughter of A'ana people ensued. Malietoa neither participated nor intervened, but he did save all who went to him for protection, and this was seen as a distinctively Christian act.<sup>37</sup> Back in Savai'i, change soon followed:

Malietoa and his sons renounced their superstitions; and their example was soon followed by their wives and children. This, with the determination to drown *Papo*, the god of war...created an immense excitement throughout the islands, and materially contributed to the furtherance of the Gospel.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, fn. 7, 239. See also fn. 1 above.

<sup>33</sup> Samoa District Committee, Minutes, August 1837, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (hereinafter PMB) microfilm #95, Yale Divinity Library, New Haven (hereinafter YDL).

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 306-7.

<sup>35</sup> Pers. comm. from Niel Gunson.

<sup>36</sup> Ebenezer Prout, *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend John Williams, Missionary to Polynesia* (London 1843), 246.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-51.



Boti, ‘between whom and the people there had grown up something of the feelings engendered by the pastoral relationship’,<sup>39</sup> agreed to live in the district of Malava, on Savai‘i, and this helped precipitate a conflict between the Christians (led by Tagaloa) and traditional factions. When violence seemed inevitable, Malietoa set aside his previous neutrality and intervened. This ‘dismantled the last fortress of superstition in that part of the island, and left Tangaloa and Boti in peaceful possession of their liberties and their religion’.<sup>40</sup>

A different version comes from Barff, who states that three of the neglected teachers followed Malietoa to Sagana, Malietoa’s principal residence in Upolu, in order to beg for relief. When they reached Malietoa, he was ill with an infection, but one of the teachers was allowed to bleed him. This led to his recovery, and Malietoa became more generous with their provisions — ‘[letting] them have food in all or any of his lands’<sup>41</sup> — and more helpful to their cause. Barff attributed Malietoa’s conversion to this incident.<sup>42</sup>

A third version comes from Williams, from whom Prout borrowed. Williams mentions that Malietoa ‘saved all who fled to him for refuge & has obtained a great name through the country for so doing’.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the three teachers were sent over to take a small present to Malietoa after Williams’ return, but its purpose was not related to the war; it was a political gesture related to a dispute over the location of a new chapel.<sup>44</sup> In 1830, Malietoa stated that he would ‘become a worshipper of Jehovah’ on his return from war<sup>45</sup> and, in 1832, when some members of his family were pressing for the abandonment of the old gods, Malietoa made a dramatic public announcement:

‘Do you not know’, he said, ‘that the gods will be enraged with me for abandoning them, and endeavour to destroy me? And perhaps Jehovah may not have the power to protect me against the effects of their anger! My proposition, therefore, is, that I should try the experiment of becoming his worshipper, and then, if he can protect me, you may with safety follow my example; but if not, I only shall fall a victim to their vengeance — you [the *aiga*] will be safe.’<sup>46</sup>

Williams was impressed by Malietoa’s pragmatism and courage: ‘The proposition of Malietoa to his children when he embraced Christianity was not a proposition that a thoughtless ignorant man would make’, he wrote in his journal.<sup>47</sup>

There are common elements in each of these stories, but they also convey different messages. Each has three teachers following Malietoa to Upolu, and all end with his commitment to Christianity. In the teachers’ account, Malietoa is unwilling to consider such a commitment until the fighting is over; his refusal

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> Barff, ‘Mr. Barff’s Account of Mr. Buzacott’s Labours’, South Seas Personal, Box 1, SOAS.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 128.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 345.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Williams, ‘Narrative of a Voyage’. Also in Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 236–7.



to participate in the slaughter is an important new step (even though he did not to try to stop it); and this is followed by his decision to embrace Christianity. It is a personal, intellectual and spiritual evolution. In Barff's account, Malietoa converts as the result of a cure and in gratitude to the (Western) medical treatment he received from the teachers. This is a familiar human response. Gunson writes that 'medicine played a prominent part in winning adherents' and describes Malietoa as 'one of the most illustrious converts to accept Christianity mainly for medical reasons',<sup>48</sup> but it is neither heroic nor considered. In the third version, Williams portrays Malietoa as a thoughtful and courageous leader at centre stage, accepting all the risk of offending the old gods. Prout appears to be reporting the same event when he refers to Malietoa and his sons renouncing their superstitions, but he shifts the focus when he writes that 'the fame of the teachers now spread far and wide'.<sup>49</sup> In each of these accounts, the teachers play prominent roles, but in framing his version of events during Williams' absence as the 'Teachers' Narrative', Prout emphasises their separate and important contributions.

### *Williams and Malietoa*

Williams and Malietoa were close. Early on, Malietoa stated that he would consider himself and Williams *aiga tasi*, or one family,<sup>50</sup> and this helps explain the chief's loyalty to the LMS during Williams' long absence after 1832. Writing their first letter to London from Samoa in 1836, the newly arrived LMS missionaries reported that Malietoa had told them that Turner 'had many times pressed [Malietoa and some other *matai*] to "lotu" to him (the Wesleyan) but that they had refused because of their promise to "lotu" to Mr. Williams and Mr. Barff'.<sup>51</sup>

Malietoa and Williams reached an easy accommodation over potentially contentious issues. When Malietoa asked Williams in 1830 which customs he considered bad, Williams' answer was diplomatic:

In reply I informed him, that there were very many things, the evil of which they would see, as soon as they were a little more enlightened; and that therefore our first object was to supply them with knowledge. Still there were some practices, the sinfulness of which I thought they could not but perceive, although deficient in Christian knowledge. I then referred to war, revenge, adultery, theft, lying, cheating, their obscene dances, and many of their pastimes, and concluded by exhorting them to be constant in their attendance upon the teachers.<sup>52</sup>

In 1832, decisions about 'which customs are bad' and what to do about them were still to be deferred. In one conversation with Malietoa, Williams listed many bad customs but together they decided 'that force or authority to put them

<sup>48</sup> Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace* (Melbourne 1978), 254.

<sup>49</sup> Prout, *Memoirs*, 250.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 346.

<sup>51</sup> Heath et al. to Ellis, 13 June, 1836, South Seas Letters, Box 10/9/A, SOAS.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 433-434.

away at present would not be judicious'.<sup>53</sup> In the same conversation, he expressed confidence that 'in a short time [Samoans] would be able to distinguish between good and bad and of themselves would see the propriety of casting away those which were bad'.<sup>54</sup> This expression of confidence may have reflected the reality that Williams (at that time) had little or no prospect of a sustained presence in Samoa, and that any presence he did have would be at Malietoa's discretion. More likely, it reflected a genuine confidence in the interest and capacity of the Samoans to decide such matters for themselves.

R.P. Gilson observed that, 'In dealing with the chiefs, Williams was probably guided more by considerations of expediency than was any other London Missionary Society missionary of his time. Certainly, no one placed a higher value on the patronage of chiefs.'<sup>55</sup> Williams had forged close ties with the chiefs Makea in Rarotonga and Tamatoa in Raiatea, but Williams soon recognised that in Samoa Malietoa did not have the same power. In his 1830 journal, Williams noted that Malietoa was not 'King' in the sense of exercising a dominant, central authority:

There [sic] government is but of a very indifferent kind, every Principle [sic] Chief having almost equal authority in his own Place. Malietoa was called the Principle [sic] Chief of the Leeward Islands now that [Tamafaiga] was dead. He has however no real authority but at his own Place except in case of war or any thing which concerns the People as a body when they look up to him as their Leader.<sup>56</sup>

During the wars, Malietoa was certainly the leader, but in religious matters his influence was indirect and sometimes paradoxical. In the 'Teachers' Narrative', Prout describes the effect of Malietoa's tour (with many attendants) after his victory in 1832:

The design of this royal visitation was selfish and political; but, as the chief and his suite proclaimed, wherever they went, the wonderful truths which they had recently learned, avowed their belief in the new religion, observed the Sabbath as a sacred day, and labored with new-born zeal to make proselytes, the journey added many more to the number of nominal adherents to Christianity, and was still more useful in preparing the way for competent teachers.<sup>57</sup>

Later, as we shall see, some missionaries saw Malietoa as an obstacle rather than an ally in the promotion of Christianity. Malietoa, along with many other Samoans, was strongly influenced by Makea, the Rarotongan chief who accompanied Williams to Samoa in 1832. Makea impressed everyone with his appearance and attire, and with his accounts of the material advantages of the Europeans and (as he personally represented) adherents to the new religion. In this instance, Williams' tactic of working through the high chiefs paid off in Samoa.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, 'Narrative of a Voyage'.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, 75.

<sup>56</sup> Williams and Barff, 'A Journal of a Voyage undertaken for the Purpose of Introducing Christianity among the Fejees and Samoas', (TS), 29.

<sup>57</sup> Prout, *Memoirs*, 249.

During this visit, in 1832, Williams noted Samoan villagers actively debating religious issues, expressing different opinions about what they should do. Some saw material advantages in becoming Christians, and Williams paraphrased the discussion:

‘Their ships are like floating houses... Their persons also are covered from head to foot in beautiful clothes... Their axes are so sharp... Now I conclude that the God who has given to his white worshippers these valuable things must be wiser than our gods.’<sup>58</sup>

In the same passage, Williams describes one chief calling for caution, just as the English would have done if the Samoans had gone to England and suggested that the natives of that land should follow the god Tangaroa. Williams remarks that ‘The Samoans must be allowed to be a shrewd sensible people’.<sup>59</sup> He decided that leaving things up to the Samoans was not only expedient but held out the best prospect for success. Such discussions also make it apparent that the decision to accept Christianity was often made at the grassroots level, not by chiefly fiat.

Malietoa was shrewd. Even before he embraced Christianity, he saw advantages in protecting the teachers and controlling their activities. Other *matai* had to go to him to request teachers for their districts and villages, and he also benefited from the material advantages that the *papalagi* (Europeans) could bring; when he insisted on receiving a musket, Williams obliged. In their 1830 journal, Williams and Barff stated that Malietoa ‘pleaded that he should become the laughing stock of all his brother Chiefs if we did not give him a musket’.<sup>60</sup> Gift-giving was and is a delicate matter in Samoa, as already indicated, and Malietoa here was seeing Western goods as reflecting status within the traditional culture. It was not merely a ploy to acquire a gun. In matters of status, Malietoa was single-minded. Williams and the teachers did not succeed in influencing him to stop the wars in 1830 and 1832; in fact, he barely listened to them.

Williams had been in Polynesia since 1817. He had been energetic, aggressive, and ultimately not particularly successful in his endeavours, but he was becoming famous for his ship-borne evangelism. He was also changing. His journals support Gunson’s view that by 1830 Williams had grown ‘to have a greater tolerance of native custom’ and had become ‘more liberal in his approach to island culture’.<sup>61</sup> He welcomed Malietoa’s conversion without dwelling on the chief’s continuing polygamy (just one of the things precluding church membership), a situation that reflects his leniency in sexual matters<sup>62</sup> and, perhaps, the ripening of

<sup>58</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 572–3.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, ‘Narrative of a Voyage’. Also in Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 236.

<sup>60</sup> John Williams and Charles Barff, ‘A Journal of a Voyage undertaken for the Purpose of Introducing Christianity among the Fejees and Samoas’, (TS), 25.

<sup>61</sup> Niel Gunson, ‘John Williams and his ship: the bourgeois aspirations of a missionary family’, in D.P. Crook (ed.), *Questioning the Past: a selection of papers in history and government* (St. Lucia, Qld 1972), 95.

<sup>62</sup> Gunson, ‘John Williams and His Ship’, 91.

a compassionate view he reveals when discussing the plight of the displaced wives of the chiefs who had abandoned polygamy in Rarotonga.<sup>63</sup> In November 1839 — shortly before he left Samoa for the last time — Williams accompanied Charles Wilkes, Commander of the United States' Exploring Expedition, at a meeting with Malietoa at Sagana. The surroundings were tranquil and picturesque, clean and neat, and the presence of extra wives was gently passed over: 'Here Malietoa was seen in his domestic circle, with his wives and children around him . . . His wives busied themselves in getting things in order, very much after the fashion of other parts of the world.'<sup>64</sup> Earlier, in Tutuila, Wilkes had observed that

Most of the people look back to the days when polygamy existed with regret, and cannot understand why they are restricted to one wife . . . Their amusements seem to be few; their books are constantly before them, and a great portion of their time is employed over them. Old gray-headed men may be seen poring over the alphabet, and taught by some of the youngest of the family.<sup>65</sup>

Wilkes praised Williams, and apparently shared his lenient view of Malietoa's polygamy. Many of the missionaries who followed were less tolerant.

### *Malietoa and Missions after Williams*

Malietoa's relationships with the missionaries who followed Williams were more awkward. The reports and letters sent by these missionaries to the LMS directors in London mostly ignore Malietoa, but some reveal evidence of estrangement along with appreciation of his hospitality. Shortly before Malietoa's death in May, 1841, William Day, stationed at Sagana, wrote: 'I am in immediate connection with the chief, Malietoa, and wish I could say, that he gives evidence of being a Christian: he continues, however, in his way, to support the missionary cause, and is very kind to us.'<sup>66</sup> Day goes on to describe one of Malietoa's sons, Mori, as a 'docile, humble Christian, and a preacher of the Gospel that has made him what he is'. Another report from Samoa, sent to mission headquarters in London and published in 1843, noted Malietoa's death and described his life in similarly spare fashion:

In May, Malietoa, a Chief of considerable influence, who had uniformly shewn much kindness to the missionaries, & who was favourably known as the individual that afforded a hospitable reception to Messrs. Williams & Barff when they first visited the Samoan group, departed this life.<sup>67</sup>

Not all the missionaries were so reticent, and we do have a detailed account that suggests why the chief, despite his long attachment to the LMS, received such modest acknowledgements from the missionaries. This obituary was written

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 134–8.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Wilkes, *Voyage Round the World* (Philadelphia 1849), 183.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>66</sup> William Day, 48th Report of the LMS in Samoa (1842), 34, SOAS.

<sup>67</sup> CWM, 49th Report of the LMS, Samoa, 1843, 35, Special Collections CWML, H698, SOAS.

by the LMS missionary Charles Hardie, who depicts Malietoa as lacking 'any proper apprehension of the nature of the instruction to be communicated', and this was six years after Williams' first arrival.<sup>68</sup> Hardie, like Williams and others before him, but in much harsher terms, describes Malietoa's motives for welcoming and protecting the teachers as 'the desire for property, worldly advantage, & the increase in power', and he states that this was 'painfully verified in [the] subsequent history...of this ignorant, revengeful & cruel chief'.<sup>69</sup> Hardie describes Malietoa as 'very friendly towards us' but given to promising more than he could deliver. Hardie records that Malietoa spent more and more of his time in Sagana in Upolu, rather than at Sapapali'i, his traditional base and also Hardie's place of residence:

When his family in Sapapalii embraced the gospel and took a decided stand against the wicked customs & practices of their former ignorance, he became quite exasperated & used every means which either cunning or threatening could devise to bring them to compliance with his ambitious and wicked desires. But it was all in vain.<sup>70</sup>

In a specific example, Hardie describes how, shortly before his death, Malietoa decided that one of his daughters should be given in customary fashion to another *matai*, Toaa, a member of his *aiga*, who would in turn give her to Ulualala, another *matai*, as his wife. Ulualala, in Hardie's account, was a professed Christian who already had a wife. Major weddings such as this would, of course, be the cause for the full panoply of Samoan ceremony. Hardie described it as follows:

When the time appointed for giving away the chief's daughter arrives immense crowds of people are assembled — those connected with the affair bring their property and food — the distribution of which takes many days, sometimes many weeks, & the evils connected with it are incalculable. The giving away of the daughter, which is done publicly, is a scene of the most brutal & shameless obscenity — so shocking to every right & delicate feelings that it must be passed over in silence.<sup>71</sup>

Hardie also describes how Malietoa, in order to avoid interference from the missionaries and others who opposed traditional deflorations and accompanying ceremonies, had planned to move the events to Sagana. His family, however, was divided, and Hardie vigorously discouraged participation, urging individual family members to oppose Malietoa's plans. Among those so persuaded was Malietoa's son, Talavau, on whom Malietoa was depending for support: 'The old man raged & threatened & taking hold of a stone all but threw it at him.'<sup>72</sup> Hardie does not divulge how this conflict within the family and the wider community ended, but it is clear that Malietoa resisted the wholesale abandonment of the old ways. His commitment to the social conventions of

<sup>68</sup> Charles Hardie to Arthur Tidman, Foreign Secretary of the LMS, 9 February 1842, SOAS.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

the LMS was limited; it was adequate for Williams but not for those who followed. In another context, Gilson notes that Malietoa was acutely aware of possible social and political repercussions associated with casting off 'traditional responsibilities that conflicted with the responsibilities of church membership'.<sup>73</sup> This appears to be an example of such tensions.

Hardie's account of Malietoa's death, which occurred shortly after the above-described events, makes poignant reading. The chief had moved back to his lands at Sapapali'i to die, and he was besieged by visitors of all kinds, as was befitting so distinguished a figure. 'He confessed he had been a great sinner', writes Hardie, and he disposed of his great titles. Malama Meleisea notes that Malietoa's *mavaega* or dying instruction, mentioned earlier, was that the four *papa* titles be returned to their original districts and never be conferred collectively on a single person again; Malietoa, however, was careful to identify his personal choices for the titles.<sup>74</sup> Hardie describes the end with unabashed skepticism:

So ended the mortal life of Malietoa on May 11th 1841. That he died a true, penitent & believer in Jesus I can hardly believe — there was much reason to believe that had he been restored again to life he would still have persisted in his evil career. It was only when he felt that there was no more prospect of a return to health that he particularly confessed his sins & expressed his desire to put away from him what ever [sic] was evil. [Twas?] then only that he put away his wives & refused compliance with heathen customs . . . I am afraid it was only a dread of God & a desire to escape his anger that led him to renounce what he did — His case is with God & there we leave it — to be revealed in another world.<sup>75</sup>

Williams also suffered criticism from his contemporaries, and he was involved in many disputes with the LMS directors as well as with fellow missionaries. He has often been described as 'restless', and his mechanical skills enabled him to build and/or maintain the ships in which to indulge his famous inclination to roam and spread his influence beyond the confines of small islands and reefs. The directors did not approve, even forcing him to sell his first ship, a move that angered his Polynesian associates. Williams wrote contemptuously about the failure of the directors to understand the challenges of mission life and the necessity of trade for survival. He saw his boats as making possible not only his various evangelical endeavours but also the trade that could help develop 'civilization' and make the missionaries and the Polynesians independent of the rough and ready European outcasts who plied various trades in Polynesia. In England, he toured the land, promoting his book, speaking, raising money for a new ship, and becoming a national figure. In public hearings, he also spoke

<sup>73</sup> Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Meleisea describes them as follows: 'To'oa of Falelatai, who later became Tuimaleali'i fano, was bequeathed the title Tuia'ana (To'oa was the son of the sister of Malietoa Fitiseanu). The Tuiatua title was bequeathed to Mata'afa Fagamanu of the Sa Tupua in A'ana. The titles Gato'aitele and Tamasoali'i . . . were bequeathed to Malietoa's half-brother Taimalelagi. The latter was also bequeathed the Malietoa title and the honorific title of 'O le tupu o Salafai' which Tamafaiga of Manono had created for himself prior to the war of A'ana.' Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Hardie to Tidman, 9 February 1842.

about the need to protect the interests of Islanders who were threatened by violent and lawless European settlers in New Zealand and elsewhere.

His fame, however, did not make him immune from criticism. His trading activities drew the ire of his colleagues when he loaded his new ship, the *Camden*, with supplies for his son to sell upon his return to Samoa, leaving inadequate space for the personal effects of fellow missionaries on board. Missionaries who followed Williams also criticised him for painting too rosy a picture of the prospects and life in Polynesia, and many of his innovations in Rarotonga and Raiatea failed, including his European-style housing. When he died, Williams became a martyr, forever associated with his missionary ships and with Samoa but, as was the case with Malietoa, his reputation among his peers was mixed; he was harshly criticised by some but admired by others, and his achievements, although notable were limited in scope.

### *Conversion in Samoa in the Wider Context*

A number of general issues may be raised, albeit briefly, concerning conversion in Samoa and in other parts of Polynesia. Discussion of patterns of conversion, including the role of social disruption and local and missionary agency, have a long history in the Pacific Islands and are interesting in the context of Samoa. First, however, the idea that conversion came easily to Samoa might be addressed. Stephen Neill has described the history of conversion in Samoa as being 'less eventful. . . than most of the other islands. . . Within a generation, the greater part of the population had become Christian',<sup>76</sup> and Wood observes that 'The success of the London Missionary Society came easily and speedily'.<sup>77</sup> Williams, Barff and others relayed optimistic and startling results back to London after 1830, but the early records of the Samoan District Committee (SDC) of the LMS and the first few editions of the LMS newspaper, the *Samoan Reporter*, mostly attest to difficulty and frustration. In the first issue of the *Samoan Reporter* (1845), 15 years after Williams' first visit, a report from A'ana and Tuamasaga included the following tally: church members 122, suspended 12, expelled three, baptised six children, deaths seven. In the second issue, Hardy, Turner and Stair report that:

None have been received into Church fellowship during the past year, but there are a considerable number of candidates, some of whom are very hopeful, several of whom we are just on the eve of admitting to communion. From time to time we have had sad failures, which leads us to be very cautious as to whom we receive. There is much lukewarmness amongst many of our Members, but others are active and appear desirous to honor their Lord and master, and benefit those around them.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth 1977 [1964]), 299.

<sup>77</sup> Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, 268.

<sup>78</sup> *Samoan Reporter*, no. 2 (1845), microfilm. Honolulu Microfilm Services, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven [hereinafter SML].



In this issue, Stair (the printer) had better news, reporting good attendance at Sabbath School (250–300 children), and that the Sabbath was a day of rest, and every village had a chapel.

Four years later, in the midst of renewed civil war on Upolu, William Harbutt brought more disappointing news from Lepa, Upolu:

An account of the affairs of this district must be one of a saddening character. I can only tell of a church disorganized, congregations broken up, and schools scattered; whilst, through the whole of the land, in every village, disorder and a laxity of morals begin to prevail.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, the SDC reported in November 1849 that, despite the war, there were 1,704 church members and 3,212 children in day schools.<sup>80</sup>

Sectarian divisions in Samoa were soon well established, and there is evidence that the traditional religion also persisted into mid-century. In 1858, Lt Conway Shipley arrived in Samoa aboard HMS *Calypso* (under Captain Worth). Shipley was an artist, so both his images and writing provide us with an interesting record of the religious allegiances as he saw them in Upolu. He describes the people as being divided into ‘three religious denominations, i.e. Devil, Mikkonary, and Popè, [who] may generally be known at sight from peculiarities of dress’. The Devil Party (heathens) ‘dye their hair yellow, wear it long, and tied in a bunch on the top of the head’; when excited, they let hair down, giving ‘a savage appearance’. The men were tattooed with the *pe ‘a* (a traditional body tattoo for men), and the women tattooed the corners of the mouth and ‘a few lines on their bodies and fingers, and whitewash their hair and clip it short’. Both sexes were naked to their loins. ‘Mikkonary’ men had short hair, were monogamous, and their children were not tattooed. Women sported long hair ‘dressed in bands, and have a long, loose gown’. These were Christians, and all were literate (taught by missionaries and Mrs Williams). The ‘Popè’ faction dressed however they wanted, had as many wives as they pleased, ‘and, indeed, [are allowed] to remain in the same savage, uncivilized state, provided only they always wear a string of beads round their necks, with a cross attached to it’. Shipley estimated the population of Upolu to be about 30,000, of whom one-third were Christian and one-third favourably disposed to the missionaries.<sup>81</sup>

Fa‘afouina Iofi, writing about his native Samoa, suggests that the reception of Christianity was facilitated by the compatibility between much from the old religion/*fa‘a Samoa* (or ‘Samoa way’) and Christianity, and by the fact that the *fa‘a Samoa* remained (and remains) strong into the modern era. Both Christianity and the *fa‘a Samoa* ‘recognize the interrelatedness of the individual and the community’ and, even though the community, he claims, is more important in Samoa, Iofi sees Christianity helping the *fa‘a Samoa* adjust to growing individualism.<sup>82</sup> He notes that although obedience to the Covenant is central

<sup>79</sup> *Samoa Reporter*, no. 9 (1849), SML.

<sup>80</sup> Samoa District Committee, Minutes, November, 1849, PMB #95 m/film, YDL.

<sup>81</sup> Lieut. Conway Shipley, *Sketches in the Pacific* (London 1851), 19ff. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

<sup>82</sup> Fa‘afouina Iofi, ‘Samoa Cultural Values and Christian Thought’, 93.

to the Old Testament, the message of Jesus, in the New Testament, is addressed mostly to the individual. The thunder and vengefulness of the Old is replaced by the love and forgivingness of the New. These dualities of force/forgiveness and community/individual were also part of the old *fa 'a Samoa*, as was a kind of Trinity, the Tupufia, in the form of Tagaloa — one godhead with three aspects:

- Tagaloa-lagi (creator of planets, etc.)
- Tagaloa-mana (creator of fish, darkness...)
- Tagaloa-fa'atupunu'u (creator of dry land, water birds, beasts)

All three combined to make the first human.<sup>83</sup>

Iofi also sees the Church as a kind of *aiga* in which service to Christ is modelled on the traditional service to the *ali'i* (chiefs) and in which the congenial relationship between ordinary Samoans and their *ali'i* was easily transferred to the new relationship between parishioners and pastor. Christ's authority over the Church was equivalent to the *matai*'s authority over the *aiga*, and the ideal *matai* came to be 'a true Christian'. More recently, Cluny Macpherson has maintained that 'A natural alliance developed between the chiefs and the missions', and that, although contact with the west 'altered the basis of chiefly authority, it did not displace the chieftaincy'.<sup>84</sup> Continuity and adaptation, therefore, may be seen as characterising conversion in Samoa, rather than a wrenching breach. It seems clear that conversion in Samoa, whether *en masse* or individual, was not as easy and spontaneous as is sometimes portrayed, but neither was there a prolonged period of utter frustration for the missionaries, as occurred in Tahiti, for example.

There is also the question whether Polynesians became more receptive to Christianity after periods of conflict and social breakdown. An extended discussion of this issue in the context of New Zealand can be found in a series of articles written by J.M.R. Owens<sup>85</sup> (who responds to the work of Harrison Wright),<sup>86</sup> Judith Binney<sup>87</sup> and K.R. Howe.<sup>88</sup> One idea advanced by Wright and elaborated by Binney, but disputed by Owens and Howe, was that social disruption was a necessary precondition for the adoption of Christianity. Williams himself observed that

It is a very remarkable fact, that in no island of importance has Christianity been introduced without a war; but it is right to observe, that in every instance, the heathens have been the aggressors. It was so in both at Tahiti and Raiatea.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 5–6.

<sup>84</sup> Cluny Macpherson, 'The persistence of chiefly authority in Western Samoa', in Geoffrey M. White and Lamont Lindstrom (eds.), *Chiefs Today: traditional Pacific leadership and the postcolonial state* (Stanford 1997), 23, 24.

<sup>85</sup> J.M.R. Owens, 'Christianity and the Maoris to 1840', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 2:1 (1968) 18–40.

<sup>86</sup> Harrison M. Wright, *New Zealand 1769–1840: early years of Western contact* (Cambridge, MA 1959).

<sup>87</sup> Judith Binney, 'Christianity and the Maoris to 1840: a comment', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 3:2 (1969), 143–65.

<sup>88</sup> K.R. Howe, 'The Maori response to Christianity in the Thames–Waikato area, 1833–1840', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 7:1 (1973) 28–46.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Missionary Enterprises*, 185.

In Samoa, however, there seems little evidence to support this idea, even when taking into account Malietoa's wars and his tour of 1832. There was war when Williams arrived in 1830, but there had been wars before, and there were wars afterwards. It could be said that Malietoa's victories assisted the Christian party, especially those associated with the LMS, and Malietoa's decision to allow the displaced people of A'ana to return to their lands was a Christian and political act of some importance, but Malietoa was also witness (at least) to the burning alive of many people associated with his enemies in 1832. In addition, Christianity, as noted above, was already present in Samoa, without fighting, before Williams and Barff arrived. Interestingly, Gilson disputes the idea that Tamafaiga would have opposed the mission, observing that he did not suppress the converts and cults already in Samoa before 1830. Samoans, he wrote, were 'polytheistic and practical people, tolerant of the gods of other men, and inclined to judge a deity at least partly in terms of the favors he lavished upon the living'.<sup>90</sup> Williams, Fauea and others rejoiced at the news of Tamafaiga's death, but they may have assumed too much in giving this incident great significance in terms of the reception of Christianity.

Wright and Binney suggest that European influence led to social disruption and thence to missionary success, but Owens and Howe stress that Maori interest in the Christian message was the crucial factor, along with increasingly effective practices among the missionaries. In Samoa, the reception enjoyed by Williams and Barff was warm from the start, and Williams' account of Samoan conversations regarding the relative merits of Christianity and the traditional religion also suggest widespread Samoan interest from the outset. Many Samoans decided to embrace Christianity even in the absence of European missionaries after 1830, and the demand for resident European missionaries came largely from the Samoans themselves, although Williams and others also advocated this. Some missionaries, including Peter Turner, the Wesleyan, attracted large followings. Referring to Williams' observations, Meleisea states that the Samoans did not 'embrace Christianity lightly. They did so with deliberation for the most materialistic of reasons and with Samoan assumptions about religion.'<sup>91</sup> The association of Western material goods (including weaponry) with the new religion, the apparently universal appeal of literacy, the Christian message of peace and its broad compatibility with the *fa'a Samoa*, the effective work of Polynesian and European missionaries, and the early emergence of Samoan pastors from the Malua seminary on Upolu — all of these and more appear to have encouraged the acceptance of Christianity in Samoa. To this complicated mix we should add the influence of Malietoa Vainu'upo and the missionary John Williams, whose advocacy and personal friendship helped set a path for Samoan Christianity that led eventually to virtually universal adoption of the new religion as well as the development of a pioneering Samoan evangelical tradition. Today, we see the emergence of new Samoan theological thinking that

<sup>90</sup> Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, 72.

<sup>91</sup> Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, 17.

draws on the rich traditions of the *fa'a Samoa*, the Church, and modern concepts of social justice and sustainability.

#### ABSTRACT

The central events in most versions of the acceptance of Christianity in Samoa are the arrival of the missionary John Williams and his encounters with the *matai* Malietoa Vainu'upo in 1830 and 1832. This paper complicates this story. Christianity was already present in Samoa in 1830, and Williams and Malietoa, although important and intriguing figures, played relatively modest parts in the full story of the establishment of the new religion. Williams spent only about a month in Samoa in these first two visits, and Malietoa, although he embraced Christianity in 1832, lived in ways that debarred him from church membership and angered some of the resident missionaries. The snapshots collected here may or may not debunk these men's legends, but they are intended to encourage a reassessment of their place in this part of Samoan history.

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