

Book Review – The Religions of Oceania

The term “world religions” often brings to mind beautiful European cathedrals, worshippers around the Ganges River, or pilgrims in Mecca for the Hajj. The term “world religious leader” evokes Jesus teaching His disciples while walking down a dusty trail in Palestine, Muhammad on camelback leading an Arab tribe in an attack on an enemy caravan, or a robed and bald Siddharta Gautama meditating with followers in the Sakya state. Outside the Middle East and northern India, common religious images include totems, shamans, jungle spirits, and witches.

The vast Pacific Ocean, dotted by thousands of islands and archipelagos, and inhabited by small numbers compared to the teeming masses of Europe, Asia, and Africa, is rarely considered in studies of world religions. Nonetheless, as Tony Swain and Gary Trompf reveal in *The Religions of Oceania*, this area has an important religious tradition. Swain and Trompf both teach at the University of Sydney, Australia and are recognized experts in the religions of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

The authors begin describing the habitation of this part of the world, which they suspect began at least 120,000 years before the present (BP). Aboriginal society was semi-nomadic and based on small kin groups. Before European contact there were about one million aborigines spread out over nearly eight million square kilometers.¹ By 1700, about two million natives were spread out in the Pacific islands. Settlers, mostly from Asia, brought dogs, pigs, rice, sweet potatoes, and technology (such as iron working) before the first European vessel arrived.

The first major section of *The Religions of Oceania* describes the religious story of the Australian aborigines. Their worldview was not based on time per se but on space. People were tied to spaces – they were born not just in but from a place, they lived their lives in that place, and when they died their spirit rejoined the ancestral spiritual heritage of that place. Rather than a detailed cosmology, early Aboriginal belief understood that something exists, that something becomes active, this activity gives order and shape to life. On death Ancestors take on an enduring form such as a rock which is related to their geographic place. There is no need for a Creator, and rhythms, not time, regulate life.

Aborigines are born “from the land”. While the biological birth from the mother is undeniable, Aboriginal thought understands the land to have produced a child through its mother. Women give birth, raise children, and collect food while men hunt, fight, lead, and perform religious rituals. Death is an expected part of life when the spirit of a man or woman returns to the home of its paternal ancestors.

Muslim traders were some of the first modern outsiders to contact the Aborigines, and while there was trade, there was also early and continued conflict.² The Australian “All Mother” cult probably arose as highly localized groups of Aborigines had to define themselves in opposition to these intruders. A bigger change came with the arrival of the “first fleet” of Europeans in 1788. As was the experience with other native populations, exposure to smallpox and other Eurasian diseases was devastating. By 1850, 96% of the Aboriginal population in the southeast of Australia had died.³ Swain and Trompf’s accusation that this was likely due to germ warfare, however, is farcical. The germ theory of disease was not even widely accepted before the late 1800s, so to attribute successful “germ warfare” to early European settlers is anachronistic. If the authors knew anything about germ warfare, they would know how unsuccessful modern attempts to use biologics against enemies has been, and therefore how unlikely it is that early Enlightenment thinkers could have done better.

Traders and soldiers were soon followed by missionaries. Unlike the former, who stayed in places where they could make money or were assigned, the later sought out any concentrations of people. Also unlike the former, who usually preferred natural resources to human resources, missionaries generally cared about the people, often

¹ *The Religions of Oceania*, 4.

² *Ibid*, 51.

³ *Ibid*, 57.

learning their language and culture and providing keen early anthropological insights. The “All Father” cult arose after contact with European Christianity. Sometimes conflict was violent, such as on Battle Mountain, where white mounted police killed over 200 Kalkatungu warriors. World War II revealed some of the vulnerabilities of the white men, and reinforced “Cargo Cultism”, in which small religious groups tried to conjure “ancestor derived” shipments of European goods. Since the war, Christianity has blossomed in the native Australian population. As of the early 2000s, at least 70% of Australian aborigines claimed some affiliation with Christianity.⁴ However, this faith is indigenized rather than having the same cultural constructs as Christianity in Europe or America.

The second major section of *The Religions of Oceania* describes the religious story of natives in Melanesia (New Guinea to Fiji), Micronesia (Marianas to Kiribati), and Polynesia (Hawaii to Easter Island to New Zealand). Deities played a much larger role in these societies than they did in Australia, and creation myths are common. Whereas aborigines may not know their ancestors two generations before, Melanesians, Micronesians, and Polynesians (MMPs) will often know theirs six generations back. As with Australia, however, war was an important part of life. One’s “security circle” included one’s own village and maybe tribe, and anyone outside of that circle was prey, or predator. Intertribal marriage alliances sometimes held, but in times of war, the woman could be suspected of treachery. The exchange of goods regulated life. Neighbors exchanged goods and services in day to day life, and the living gave goods and services to their ancestors in exchange for spiritual protection and good fortune.⁵

Polynesia and Micronesia are known for their religiously powerful kings and hierarchical societies, while Melanesia is famed for its “big men”, whose “magic” was more materialistic.⁶ “Mana” was the totality of spirit power, which conferred earthly prosperity, health, and military victory. Poverty, sickness, and defeat were evidence of sorcery, the displeasure of ancestors, or the wrath of the gods. Polynesia and Micronesia had extensive religious ritual and large temples, with huge ceremonies sometimes including ritual sexual intercourse and human sacrifice.⁷

At death, men and women became (hopefully helpful) spirits. In one tribe in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea, a widow was expected to eat her dead husband’s brains, a daughter in law was expected to eat his penis, and others ate other parts of the body to gain his strength.⁸ The dead mostly stayed as part of the community, but in some Polynesian cultures the dead descended into an underworld. There was little room for eschatology.

European contact in the 18th century changed Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia forever. Colonialism from Great Britain, Holland, and even Germany brought trade, modern weapons, and Christianity. Local chiefs used all three to increase their power compared to their local rivals. Cargo cultism abounded. World Wars I and II brought material wealth and contact with the rest of the world. Mission work thrived, and many would-be religious, military, and political leaders in Oceania founded their own religions. As in Australia, however, there was both acceptance and resistance to white power.

Points of Review

The Religions of Oceania illuminated the religious landscape in a little studied part of the world. It places Australian, Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian folk religion in context with each other and with the larger world. The scope is broad, and the review of Christianity in these regions is reasonably balanced.

Trompf and Swain are excellent at what they do, study religions. They are not so good at history, and terrible at germ warfare. This book glosses past a wealth of history, a weakness since history helps to both explain the past and

⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁷ Ibid., 139, 142.

⁸ Ibid..

inform the future. Such a lack is a weakness, but is probably intentional to keep the book shorter and more readable. The comment about germ warfare was singularly unfortunate.

Conclusion

The Religions of Oceania is a worthwhile read for students of religion and missionaries who work in that region. The book is less important for pastors, and probably not a profitable use of time for a general Christian audience. For a teacher of religion, it is a good introduction and will maintain a place on the shelf.