

The Martyrs of Melanesia

Dr. James W. Ellis

College of Arts and Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, USA.

ABSTRACT: *Melanesia is a region in the southwestern Pacific Ocean that includes the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and New Guinea. The nineteenth century Christian missions to Melanesia were one of history's great cross-cultural encounters. This essay tells the stories of approximately a dozen people who lost their lives violently while serving as Melanesian missionaries. They were casualties in a religious struggle that radically altered Melanesian societies. In 1800, there were virtually no indigenous Melanesian Christians, but today the vast majority of Melanesians identify as Christian. Unfortunately, the collective position of the Melanesian martyrs within this critical historical transformation has received little scholarly attention. Perhaps this preliminary study will foster more research, of greater breadth and depth, increasing our understanding of the martyrs of Melanesia.*

KEYWORDS —Catholic, Christian, martyr, Melanesia, mission, Protestant

I. INTRODUCTION

Social and political scientists organize the Pacific Islands into three major ethno-geographic groups: Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia (Fig. 1). Melanesia is a region in the southwestern Pacific that includes Fiji, Vanuatu (once known as the New Hebrides), the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and New Guinea. Polynesians were the first to chart the Melanesia islands, followed by Spanish explorers in the latter sixteenth century. The early Spanish ships brought Catholic missionaries. Between 1750 and 1900, various western powers including Britain colonized much of Melanesia and introduced Protestant Christianity. The London Missionary Society (LMS) sent Protestant evangelists to the region in 1797 and commissioned the first indigenous Melanesian missionaries. Before long, indigenous Christians in the region vastly outnumbered their western counterparts and they began leading efforts across Melanesia, from the archipelago of Fiji to the remote jungles of New Guinea [1]. It was an exciting time of cross-cultural exchange, and conflict.

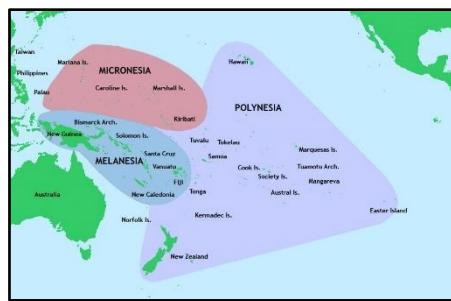


Figure 1 The South Pacific Islands. Public Domain.

Pope Gregory XVI (1765-1846) was a great proponent of overseas missions and developing indigenous clergy. In 1836, Pope Gregory established the Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania, which included Micronesia and Melanesia, and he assigned evangelization efforts to the Society of Mary (*the Marists*). A French priest named Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) founded the Society of Mary in 1816, following the international mission model of the Society of Jesus (*the Jesuits*). Father Colin claimed to have intuitions about the future. In 1838 he declared, "The Blessed Virgin will raise up in the [Marist] Society [successors to] St. Francis Xavier. . .

I am confident I shall see them before I die. I await them” [2]. St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was an original member of the Jesuit religious order and he died during an overseas mission off the coast of China. Father Colin’s prediction was fulfilled. Three Marists lost their lives serving in the Melanesian mission: Father Pierre Chanel died near Fiji in 1841, Bishop Jean-Baptiste Epalle died in the Solomon Islands in 1845, and Brother Blaise Marmoiton died in New Caledonia in 1847.

Collectively, the Protestant missions fared even worse. English Nonconformist John Williams, a pioneering Protestant missionary to Melanesia, was killed (and cannibalized) on the island of Erromango in 1839. Canadian Presbyterians, George, Ellen, and James Gordon were also killed on Erromango. The first Anglican Bishop of Melanesia, John Patteson lost his life in the Solomon Islands in 1861. The bloodshed continued into the twentieth century, with Scottish missionary James Chalmers and Australian Anglican Charles Christopher Godden dying violently in 1901 and 1906, respectively. This essay presents, by necessity in a relatively cursory manner, the circumstances surrounding the tragic deaths of each of these Christian martyrs.

A *martyr* is a person who suffers to the point of death for living according to his or her religious beliefs. The English word martyr derives from an ancient Greek term, *μάρτυς*, which means “a witness.” The Christian Bible describes Jesus Christ’s closest disciples as his witnesses in public discourse. Because the disciples acted as Jesus’ witnesses, they faced the constant danger of punishment and death [3]. In a letter to the first-century Christians of Asia Minor (in modern Turkey), the apostle Peter wrote, “[I am] a witness [*μάρτυς*] of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1, KJV). In the book of Revelation, the apostle John reflected on the souls “that were slain for the word of God, and for [their] testimony [*μαρτυρία* or “for being a witness”]” (Revelation 6:9). Christian scholar and lexicographer, Joseph Henry Thayer (1828-1901) provided an ethical definition, describing martyrs as those “who after [Christ’s] example have proved the strength and genuineness of their faith in Christ by undergoing a violent death” [4]. In general, the missionaries discussed in this essay fit Thayer’s description.

II. A CLASH OF CULTURES

A significant number of the first Catholic and Protestant missionaries to Melanesia aspired for cross-cultural compatibility, to live in harmony with the indigenous population. To use nineteenth-century parlance, they wished to live as much as possible “like the natives,” and some missionaries became “unrepentantly *nativised*” [5]. Still, cultural and linguistic differences made evangelization extremely difficult. The LMS sent George Vason to Tongatapu (the main island of the Kingdom of Tonga) in 1797. Vason wrote that when he and his fellow missionaries arrived, “we availed ourselves of every suitable opportunity to perform our daily worship, to sing and pray,’ [but lacking a mutual language, we were unable to convey the relevance of what we were doing, so our] enactments produced the effect of pure theatre” [5]. Only in retrospect could Vason and his associates successfully convey the liturgy’s proper significance [6].

Understandably, new Christian rituals confused many Melanesians. The cultural tension was only exacerbated by European missionaries’ conscious disrespect for local customs. For example, indigenous sculptural figures were deemed idols and they were often confiscated and destroyed, in an effort to eliminate the ancestral tradition of spirit worship. Missionaries spared some figures as artistic objects or collectors’ items and repurposed others as Christian devotional items, through a process of *syncretism*[7]. Syncretism occurs when outsiders introduce a new religion into a society with dissimilar beliefs and commingle differing teachings, creating a religious fusion. Confusion and culture clash played roles in the deaths of a few missionaries, including the death of the Reverend John Williams on the island of Erromango.

III. ERROMANGO: THE MARTYR ISLE

Portuguese navigator (and committed Catholic), Pedro Fernandes de Queirós (1563-1614) was captain of the first European ship to reach the islands of the New Hebrides, in May 1606. Queirós mistakenly thought he had reached Australia, so he named his discovery *AustraliadelEspíritu Santo* (The Australian Land of the Holy

Spirit). In 1774, British explorer James Cook (1728-1779) reached the same islands, which he renamed after the Hebrides, an archipelago off the western coast of Scotland (Cook was from a Scottish family). Captain Cook ventured to Erromango, one of the New Hebrides' larger volcanic islands, where he claimed to have witnessed cannibalism first-hand [8; 9].

Cannibals eat the flesh of their own kind. The English word is of relatively recent origin; its first known use was in 1541. The word derives from the Taíno term *caniba*. Classic Taíno was an historical Arawakan language spoken by indigenous Caribbeans, and was related to similar dialects once spoken in northeastern South America.

For centuries, the inhabitants of neighboring New Caledonia and Fiji had visited Erromango to obtain its abundant, sweet-scented sandalwood. They used its aromatic oil in incense. Soon after Captain Cook's visit, European merchants, such as Peter Dillon (1788-1847), began despoiling the valuable sandalwood and killing local residents who stood in their way. European merchants also introduced influenza, smallpox, and measles, decimating the island's indigenous population, which had no natural immunity to such diseases. Westerners also *black-birded* tens of thousands of indigenous Melanesians during the nineteenth century's *Kanaka* human trafficking trade. Black-birding involved kidnapping, coercing, or otherwise tricking men into leaving their native lands to serve as indentured laborers at plantations or mines in Australia or Britain's colonized Pacific islands [10]. The derogatory and now widely disapproved term *Kanak* came from the Hawai'ian expression *kānakamaoli*(meaning "ordinary person"); the term referred generally to native Hawai'ians or Melanesians. The *Kanaka* trade was very profitable; plantation owners paid up to £20 for each new black-birded laborer [11]. When the Reverend John Williams reached Erromango in 1839, the native inhabitants had good reasons to distrust newcomers.

IV. JOHN WILLIAMS

The Reverend John Williams (1796-1839) and his wife Mary Williams, *née* Chawner (died 1852) were pioneering South Pacific missionaries. The Williamses sailed from London to Polynesia's Society Islands in 1817 and established a missionary post on Raiatea, near Tahiti. For the next two decades, they visited and evangelized on several Polynesian and Melanesian island chains. They sailed from place to place on a missionary ship the Reverend Williams had built on Rarotonga, one of the Cook Islands, and christened *The Messenger of Peace* (Fig. 2). The ship's flag was emblazoned with a white dove, a Christian symbol of peace and mercy taken from the Biblical account of Noah's ark (Genesis 8:8-12; KJV). Journalists documented the Williams' undertakings for rapt newspaper readers back home in Britain. In 1835, the Reverend Williams published his own narrative detailing his evangelistic and exploratory adventures, entitled *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands*, which sold over 35,000 copies within five years [12].

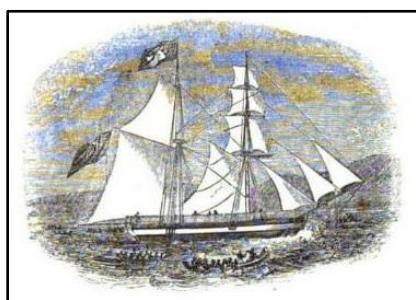


Figure 2

Anonymous, *The Messenger of Peace off Samoa*, ca. 1840.
Public Domain.

Late in 1839, the Reverend Williams and Williams' secretary, James Harris, sailed to the New Hebrides on a mission ship named *The Camden* to evangelize. They ventured 300 km southward from the main

island of Espiritu Santo to the relatively remote island of Erromango, where they were unknown. According to local oral histories, when *The Camden* landed on Erromango's Unpongkor beach (Fig. 3), the missionaries may have inadvertently happened upon and disturbed a *kastom* feast or circumcision ritual [13]. The *Bislam* (Vanuatu creole) word *kastom* translates roughly into English as "culture," and refers to traditional Melanesian religious and social customs. Whatever the case, almost immediately after Williams and Harris set foot on Erromango they were brutally killed, becoming the South Pacific's first documented Christian martyrs.



Figure 3

Unpongkor as it appears today.

Public Domain.

The Camden's captain, Robert Clark Morgan (1798-1864) gave an account of the gruesome attack at Unpongkor (Prout 1845: 160-161). Once *The Camden* arrived in the bay, Captain Morgan, the Reverend Williams, James Harris, and a few other men disembarked for a smaller whaleboat. As they paddled close to the shore, they saw some local men making "signs for [them] to go away," but they did not heed this warning. James Harris jumped into the water and waded to shore, followed by the Reverend Williams and another man named Mr. Cunningham. From the whaleboat, Captain Morgan watched as Williams, Harris, and Cunningham walked about a hundred meters along the beach, parallel to the waterline, before then turned into the bushes out of Morgan's sight. Thinking all was safe, Captain Morgan then proceeded to the beach himself. A few minutes later, the men who had remained on the whaleboat called out to Morgan for him to return. Morgan turned to see Mr. Cunningham emerging from the bushes and running toward the whaleboat. The Reverend Williams also emerged but ran straight for the sea; he was followed closely by a local man, who was later identified as a chief and warrior named Kowiwi (ironically, Kowiwi's son later joined Erromango's Christian mission[11]). Captain Morgan was able to reach the safety of the whaleboat. From there, he saw the Reverend Williams reach the water, where Kowiwi struck him repeatedly with a club. Another warrior then "pierced several arrows into [Williams'] body," turning the surf bright red. When a group of Erromangans began shooting arrows at the whaleboat, Captain Morgan had no choice: he ordered his men to retreat to *The Camden*. From its deck, he saw the Reverend Williams' lifeless body dragged into the bushes.

Mr. Cunningham survived the attack and later offered his own account. According to Cunningham, as the landing party walked along the beach,

[James Harris] wished to have a stroll inland ... and he walked on, followed by a party of the natives. [Rev. Williams] and I followed. ... [a moment later] I heard a yell, and instantly Mr. Harris rushed out of the bushes about twenty yards before me. I instantly perceived it was run or die. I shouted to Mr. Williams to run ... and I sprung forward through the natives ... who all gave way. I looked around, and saw Mr. Harris fall in a brook, and the water dash over him, a number of savages beating him with clubs. ... Mr. Williams, instead of making for the boat, ran directly down the beach into the water, and a savage after him. It seemed to me that Mr. Williams's intention was to swim off till the boat picked him up. ... [Captain Morgan] and I jumped into the boat at the same instant. ... Mr. Williams ran into deep water [and] he fell, but did not attempt to swim, when he received several blows from the club of the native on the

arms and over the head. He twice dashed his head under the water to avoid the club, with which the savage stood over him ready to strike the instant he arose. ... [S]oon several others joined ... I saw a whole handful of arrows stuck into his body. ... [O]ur friend was dead, and about a dozen savages were dragging the body on the beach, beating it in the most furious manner. A crowd of boys surrounded the body as it lay, in the ripple of the beach, and beat it with stones, till the waves dashed red on the shore with the blood of their victim [14].



Figure 4

London artist and entrepreneur George Baxter (1804-1867) produced this fanciful depiction of the tragic event entitled *Massacre of the lamented missionary the Rev. J. Williams and Mr. Harris* (1841). Public Domain.

Captain Morgan thought it unsafe to attempt retrieving the bodies, so *The Camden* set sail for New South Wales, reaching Sydney ten days later. The colonial governor dispatched the warship *H.M.S. Favourite* to Erromango to recover the remains of the Reverend Williams and Mr. Harris. Erromangan leaders confessed that they had “devoured the bodies, and that nothing remained but some of the bones,” including the skulls, which they brought to the *H.M.S. Favourite*[14]. According to the Erromangans, a few days before the Reverend Williams arrived, a group of sandalwood traders had kidnapped Kowiwi’s daughter and stolen some food. In the process, they had killed five Erromangans[15]. When Kowiwi saw *The Camden* sail into the bay and saw the whaleboat approaching the shore, he gave the order that if the visitors stayed in their small boat they should be left alone. If, however, they came ashore and entered the bush, they were to be attacked. Mr. Harris was apparently the first to pass the “death line” [11].

News of Williams’ death reached England in 1840. The directors of the London Missionary Society immediately decided to send new evangelists to Erromango, to continue what Williams had begun. Before dispatching western missionaries, however, the directors first enlisted the aid of indigenous converts from Samoa and Rarotonga, who traveled to Erromango to establish a mission station and to function as cultural intermediaries [16]. The Samoans and Rarotongans paid a heavy price for their service in the New Hebrides: between 1840 and 1850, three dozen lost their lives and, according to reports, some were cannibalized [11].

V. THE GORDON FAMILY

George Nicol Gordon (1822-1861) was born on Prince Edward Island, Canada, into a family of Scottish immigrants. During the 1840s, Gordon began his career as a Presbyterian domestic missionary in the rougher neighborhoods of Halifax, the capital city of Nova Scotia, Canada. The Presbytery of Halifax ordained Gordon “to preach the Gospel” in May 1855 and later that year Gordon became a newly ordained foreign missionary [17]. The Reverend Gordon learned of a vacant mission post in the New Hebrides, so he applied for it and was accepted. In 1855, Gordon sailed for additional training in London, where he met and married Ellen Catherine Gordon, *née* Powell (died 1861) (Fig. 5). The couple then sailed from London onboard the mission ship *The John Williams* and arrived on Erromango in early 1857. Kowiwi, the chief who had murdered John Williams, sold the Reverend Gordon a small piece of land to build a mission house. Kowiwi also showed Gordon the oven where he had the bodies of Williams and James Harris cooked before they were devoured[17; 11].



Figure 5

The Reverend George N. Gordon and Ellen Catherine Gordon, ca. 1857.

Public Domain.

The Gordons spent four difficult years on Erromango. The Reverend Gordon wrote about their grim existence in his journals and letters:

In the moral wilderness where we live, darkness covers the land — few and feeble are our friends, many and malignant are our foes. ... [C]annibals long for our flesh, attempts are made upon our lives day by day, and our humble dwelling is beset by murderers at night. ... [A]nd even where, here and there, a lone native is found willing to listen to our message, our eager expectations are constantly unfulfilled and our fondly cherished hopes vanish in bitterness of spirit. A week spent amid such scenes is equivalent to a year passed in peace [11].

On the morning of May 20, 1861, the Reverend Gordon, his wife Ellen, and a small local congregation worshipped together in the Gordon's humble mission house. The Reverend Gordon then went outside and descended a hill (which some called Mount Zion) to a nearby home to lead another service. As this service ended, a man named Narubuleet (whom some called Uhuvili) entered the home. Narubuleet and eight other men, who were waiting outside, had walked 10 km from a village called Bunkil. Narubuleet asked the Reverend Gordon for some calico cloth and the Reverend wrote a note approving the request. He asked Narubuleet to take the note to Mrs. Gordon to retrieve the cloth. Narubuleet asked the Reverend Gordon to come with him so, Narubuleet said, Gordon could also supply some medicine for an ailing relative back in Bunkil. An outbreak of rubella and measles had spread across the island [17]. As soon as the two men left the home, Narubuleet plunged a hand-held axe into the spine of the Reverend Gordon, who fell to the ground with a loud cry. Narubuleet's companions rushed forward and completed the attack. Mrs. Gordon, in her home a short distance away, heard the cry. She went outside and one of Narubuleet's companions, named Ouben (or Uven), approached. Mrs. Gordon asked Ouben about the scream and he replied it was only some boys playing. As Mrs. Gordon looked into the distance, Ouben struck her with his axe. After she fell to the ground, Ouben struck again, nearly severing Ellen Gordon's head. [17]. Archaeologists recently uncovered the remains of the Gordon's mission home where Mrs. Gordon died [15] (Fig. 6).



Figure 6

George Gordon House excavation site, Erromango, ca. 2015.

Public Domain.

Peter Milne was not a missionary, but he worked for a trading company that operated from Erromango (Don 1927). Milne thought he knew the motive for the Gordons' killings. Milne wrote a letter detailing his theory to a mission society leader who lived in Sydney and the *Sydney Morning Herald* later published the letter:

The cause of the murder, I am informed, and from my own experience I am certain to be the case, is as follows. Several months ago the measles, which had previously raged in Sydney, made its appearance in New Caledonia ... and it rapidly made progress, and a serious mortality was the result. The infection was thence carried by the various trading vessels calling there to all the surrounding islands, and fearful were the ravages of the distemper among the natives. At Lel'ou, Mare, Aneiteum, Tata, Sandwich, and Eromanga, thousands and thousands died — in fact, some of these places have nearly been depopulated. Strange to say, a similar disease has never before made its appearance among the natives, and they at once attributed it to their connection with the white men and called it 'the white man's curse.' The consequence of this idea, especially among the more savage tribes, was naturally a bitter hostility against foreigners, and singularly enough, against the only class who had nothing to do with the introduction of the disease, but, on the contrary, who had tried all means in their power to avert the calamity — I mean the missionaries. Here [on Erromango] the malady being so virulent as to threaten the extermination of the natives, and their characters being so savagely ferocious, the greatest animosity existed towards the whites. And notwithstanding that Mr. Gordon went daily from morning to night amongst the people, administering medicine, and endeavoring to alleviate, as far as lay in his power, their misery, he became the object of their extreme hatred. Nuivan a chief, having been prostrated by the disease, when almost dying, sent for Mr. Gordon, who gave him some medicine. Nuivan died next day; the tribe said that the missionary had poisoned him, and it was resolved to kill all the whites. ... To add to their feelings of enmity towards Mr. Gordon, there was yet another reason, and to illustrate this I copy the following entry in his diary. Speaking of this singular disease, which is strange and alarming to all, he writes: 'It was preceded by nearly a universal opposition to the Gospel, and much murder and idolatry. I felt sure that God would visit them in judgment, and warned them most solemnly but a few days before they were attacked. The chiefs, who maintain that to give up their idols is the cessation of their rule, can hardly now persuade their people that this is not the finger of Jehovah. I warned them to flee from the wrath to come, but they took not warning till too late.' From the disease following close on these warnings, the natives believed that the missionary had prayed to God to send it on them; and this belief readily accorded with the fixed ideas of witchcraft, which obtains universally in this island [17].

If Mr. Milne's theory is accepted, explicable motives lay behind the Gordons' seemingly inexplicably murders. The Gordons and other western newcomers brought deadly diseases to Erromango; they also brought new religious teachings that ran counter to longstanding local beliefs and threatened the local chiefs' authority [18].

George Nicol Gordon's younger brother, James Douglas Gordon (1832-1872) followed his sibling's example and became an ordained Presbyterian minister and missionary. In 1864, three years after George and Ellen's martyrdom, the Reverend James Gordon left Canada and sailed to Erromango to carry on his brother's work.

The Reverend James Douglas Gordon built a new mission station and cottage across the island from Unpongkor, at Potnuma, near the coastal village of Port Narvin [19]. In late February 1872, Gordon was in the small loft of his cottage working on an Erromangan translation of the Biblical book of Acts, with assistance from a local convert named Soso. Soso later recalled that they were specifically translating the seventh chapter of Acts, which describes Saint Stephen's martyrdom. As Stephen died, he lifted up his eyes and prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" [11; Acts 7:60, NIV].

As they translated this passage, two Erromangan men named Nerimpow and Nare suddenly appeared on the cottage's veranda. They ascended to the loft's doorway and engaged the Reverend Gordon in a conversation. When Nare had sufficiently distracted Gordon, Nerimpow seized the opportunity and struck him in the face with an axe. The blow landed so powerfully, the axe remained lodged in his skull. The Reverend Gordon fell to the floor in a pool of blood. He was the fifth missionary to die on Erromango, which came to be known as *the Martyr Isle*[19]. The motive for the murder was familiar. The Reverend Gordon had given medicine to two of Nerimpow's children, who had contracted measles. When his children died, Nerimpow blamed Douglas and vowed to seek revenge [11].

VI. PIERRE CHANEL

Exactly two decades before Protestant missionary George Nicol Gordon died on Erromango, Roman Catholic missionary Pierre-Louis-Marie Chanel (1803-1841) died under similar circumstances, on the volcanic island of Futuna. Like Gordon, Father Chanel preached a religious message that threatened the authority of the local leader.

Pierre Chanel was born near Lyon, France, into a very religious family. As a child, he dreamed of becoming a priest. Chanel completed his preparations and took his vows in 1827. Four years later, Father Chanel joined the Marist society. Under Jean-Claude Colin's leadership, the Marists aimed to become an autonomous congregation, independent from the oversight of a diocese or bishop. The Marists were devoted to overseas missions and Father Chanel was among the first group of Marist priests who left France for the Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania.

Father Chanel and Brother Marie-Nizier Delorme were assigned to the island of Futuna. Futuna and the neighboring island of Wallis are part of a French territory on the extreme western edge of Polynesia (approximately 1,500 km from Erromango). Chanel and Delorme were placed under the ostensible protection of Niuliki, the leading chief of Futuna. Niuliki believed he attained his position of authority through the benevolence of *atua* (or traditional spirits); he saw no reason to switch his loyalty to the Christian deity. In his mission journal, Father Chanel wrote, "Our good king Niuliki, said to be the man into whom the greatest god in the island [*Fakavelikele*] descends, seems to have a great fear of what his islanders will say if he rejects a god he has so often told them is powerful and terrifying" [20].

Initially, Niuliki was tolerant of the newcomers' condemnation of his spiritual beliefs, because the Catholic missionaries had little early success convincing Futunans of Christianity's validity. In time, however, the tide began to turn. Niuliki learned that the indigenous residents of Wallis had accepted Christianity and were increasingly defying their chief, LaveluaVaimua. Then, in early 1841, Niuliki's own son, Meitala defied his father and converted. Niuliki was enraged and, on April 28, 1841, he sent his son-in-law and leading warrior, Musumusu, and four petty chiefs — Fikitaki, Fuasea, Umutaouli, and Ukuloa — to kill Father Chanel. They speared and clubbed Chanel to death in his hut [20; 21; 22]. Brother Delorme was away in another area of the island when he learned of the attack, and he quickly escaped on the American whaler *William Hamilton*, which had anchored at Futuna bay on its way to Wallis. Several months later, the French mission schooner *Sancta Mariawas* dispatched to Futuna to retrieve Father Chanel's body. Niuliki had died in the interim and the Futunan Christians pleaded for a new missionary to come.

In June 1842, two new priests, Father Servant and Father Roulleaux, came to Futuna from New Zealand, and a year later almost all of the island's 1,000 inhabitants had joined the Catholic Church. New Zealand's Bishop, Jean-Baptiste François Pompallier (1802–1871) gave credit to divine providence. "It appears that the special mission of Father Chanel was just to be that of the gentle lamb whose blood, united to that of Jesus Christ which takes away the sins of the world, has been spilled by the axe of the infidel and the savage for the benefit of the people of Futuna, who have all become edifying Christians" [22]. In an ironic twist, Musumusu, the leader of the band that martyred Father Chanel, became one of Futuna's "edifying Christians." Musumusu was baptized in 1844 and he died on January 15, 1846. Futunans placed a large white cross over his gravesite, which is outside the Futunan church at Poi. The church also houses Father Chanel's fractured skull

and other relics [23] (Fig. 7). On June 12, 1954, Pope Pius XII canonized Chanel as a saint and the spiritual patron of Oceania [24].



Figure 7

Basilica of St. Peter Chanel, Poi, Futuna, current structure completed 1986.

VII. BROTHER BLAISE MAMOITON

In 1774, Captain James Cook landed on the northeast coast of an uncharted Melanesian island. Captain Cook thought the island resembled the west coast of Scotland, so he gave its archipelago the name New Caledonia. The ancient Romans had given the name Caledonia to the lands lying north of their Britannia province (roughly modern Scotland). New Caledonia became a French colony during the nineteenth century. In 1843, the French naval ship *Bucéphale* brought a group of Marist missionaries to the northern coast of New Caledonia's main island of Grande Terre. The bishop of Central Oceania, Guillaume Douarre (1810-1853) led the missionaries. They received a very cordial welcome from Paiama, chief of the Poumans and a resident of the village of Mahamata. Bishop Douarre decided to build his mission station adjacent to Mahamata. The Pouma clan benefited from the station's proximity and shared the provisions that French ships periodically delivered to the missionaries.

In the summer of 1847, the northern regions of Grande Terre suffered from a severe drought. Crops withered, animals died, and the Marists and Pouma clan faced starvation [25]. Bishop Douarre decided to move the mission station to the island's south side, where the drought was less severe. However, when the Poumans saw missionaries transporting stocks of supplies southward through the jungle paths, they protested and set fire to trees and bushes near the mission garden. On July 18, 1847, a sub-chief named Gomenewas sent to convince the missionaries to stay and to demand food for his starving people. His requests were rejected, so Gomene ordered his men to set fire to the mission house. The men then went to where the missionaries stored their food. Brother Blaise Mamoiton guarded the storehouse and he had trained an attack dog to chase away anyone attempting to steal provisions. Brother Mamoiton and his guard dog lost their lives that day (figs. 8, 9). The surviving Marists escaped to the south of Grande Terre, where a French warship named *Brillant* was docked, and they were evacuated to Sydney [26].



Figures 8, 9

Balade Church, Grand Terre, New Caledonia,
window commemorating Brother Mamoiton's death.

VIII. JEAN-BAPTISTE EPALLE

In 1844, the Roman Catholic Church consecrated Father Jean-Baptiste Epalle as bishop of the newly established Vicariate Apostolic of Melanesia [24]. In February 1845, Bishop Epalle, seven priests, and six brothers sailed from Europe onboard the *Bussorah Merchant* for Sydney. From there, the group embarked onboard the *Marian Watson*, a 146-ton sandalwood ship, for the islands of Melanesia. A French colonial consul based in Sydney named Jean Faramond (born 1796) saw the group off, and he worried that Bishop Epalle was underestimating the hazards his band of missionaries would face. Faramond later wrote,

I was struck by the vagueness of [Epalle's] plans. I pointed out to him the dangers to which he was exposing himself in landing in the midst of savage people. ... But I knew in advance that my warnings were useless, he placed himself at the mercy of Providence and regarded it as a culpable lack of confidence in divine power to arrange his voyage according to the ordinary rules of human prudence. I accompanied him to his ship ... I was following him with [a leader of the Catholic Church in Australia] to whom I said 'There is a good missionary that we shall never see again. He will be dead with his companions before six months.' 'That would be a great happiness,' he replied. 'It is the blood of martyrs which makes religion prosper. Look at Futuna, a missionary [Pierre Chanel] was sacrificed there and today the entire island is Catholic' [27].

On December 2, 1845, the *Marian Watson* reached the Solomon Islands, stopping first at San Cristóbal, then continuing on to Thousand Ships Bay on the southern coast of Santa Isabel. On December 16, Bishop Epalle led an exploratory party ashore at Thousand Ships Bay and met a group of local men. They warned the missionaries against venturing further inland, where they said a less peaceful group awaited. Disregarding this warning, Bishop Epalle and his associates walked beyond the coastline. They encountered a group of forty armed warriors, and Bishop Epalle offered gifts to their leader. One of the men demanded Epalle's episcopal ring and he refused. A violent struggle ensued. Bishop Epalle was struck with five axe blows to his head and the other missionaries received lesser injuries. They retreated hastily to the *Marian Watson* to treat their wounds.

Mission scholar, Hugh Laracy blamed Bishop Epalle's attack on his cultural "insensitivity to the seriousness of local rivalries. ... Identification with one group of people meant incurring the hostility of that group's enemies" [24]. Bishop Epalle survived for three days, clinging to life onboard the *Marian Watson*. On Friday morning, December 19, 1845, he opened his eyes slightly and clutched a crucifix. He began breathing painfully and faintly, and an official read the liturgical prayers. As the missionaries knelt praying in a circle around his bed, Bishop Epalle took his last breath, and they burst into tears [26]. The Bishop's remains were interred on the sparsely populated island of San Jorge (Fig. 10). Decades later, Marist priest and seafarer, Pierre Rouillac visited San Jorge in the schooner *Eclipse* and recovered the Bishop's skull, which was broken in five

places [24]. Rouillac oversaw the skull's reinternment near Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, but it was permanently lost during the bombing of Guadalcanal in the Second World War.

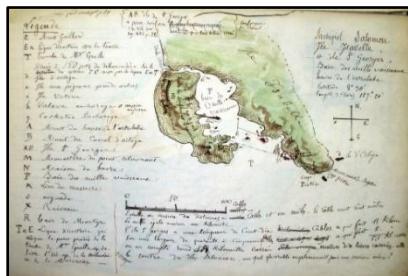


Figure 10

Nineteenth-century map indicating Bishop Epalle's tomb on San Jorge.

Public Domain.

IX. JOHN PATTESON

Both Catholic and Anglican Bishops were martyred in the Solomon Islands. John Coleridge Patteson (1827-1871) was the son of a wealthy and prominent judge from Norfolk, England. Patteson's great-uncle was Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), a theologian, poet, and philosopher who helped found the Romantic Movement in England. John Patteson was educated at Eton College and Oxford, completing his studies in 1853. The following year, Patteson was ordained an Anglican priest at Exeter Cathedral, in southwest England. George Augustus Selwyn (1809-1878), the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand, came to London in 1854 and recruited Patteson as a missionary to Melanesia. In May 1855, the Reverend Patteson boarded the *Duke of Portland* bound for Auckland.

The Reverend Patteson was stationed in New Zealand his first years as a missionary, but he spent most of his time sailing on the mission ship *The Southern Cross* throughout the island chains of Melanesia on evangelical tours. Following Bishop Selwyn's example, when the Reverend Patteson first came to an island where he was unknown and where the people might be hostile, he swam ashore wearing a top hat in which he kept presents to distribute, as a means of fostering goodwill. Usually, in little time he was able to make friends, learn the names of the local leaders, and acquire enough of their language to use it when he returned [28]. On such visits, the Reverend Patteson's primary aim was to gain approval to bring local boys to New Zealand, or to the mission stations on Mota Island or Norfolk Island, to teach them about Christianity. They could then return home and evangelize others. Patteson was an outspoken critic of the blackbirding trade, but when he visited islands for the first time, many local inhabitants suspected he had come to abduct boys and men as indentured laborers.

The Reverend Patteson became the first Anglican Bishop of Melanesia in 1861, the same year George and Ellen Gordon lost their lives on Erromango. Very shortly after learning the Gordons' fate, Patteson sailed to Erromango, visited the Gordon's graves, and "read over them the funeral service as a mark of his respect for these brave and martyred fellow-workers in the South Pacific." In spite of the dangers, Bishop Patteson maintained "full faith in his own safety" [29]. Indeed, he was confident that Melanesians could be his greatest allies. In one of his letters Patteson wrote, "I solve the difficulty in Melanesian work by saying, 'Use Melanesians.' I tell people plainly I don't want white men. I have no intention of taking any more from England, Australia, or New Zealand. [T]hey cost about ten times as much as the Melanesian, and but a very small proportion do the work as well" [29]. Patteson wrote, Melanesian "men are needed who have ... [the] strong religious common sense to adapt Christianity to the wants of the various nations that live in Melanesia, without compromising any truth or doctrine or principle of conduct, ... [These] are to be Melanesian, not English, Christians" [29].



Figure 11
Watercolor sketch of Nukapu, ca. 1871.
Public Domain.

On September 20, 1871, *The Southern Cross* arrived in the harbor of Nukapu, one of the Solomon Islands (Fig. 11). As was his custom, Bishop Patteson came ashore alone. He did not know that a few days earlier blackbird traders had kidnapped five men from Nukapu. Perhaps the island's residents suspected Patteson had come to do something similar; on occasion, blackbirders impersonated missionaries to facilitate abduction [30]. Whatever the case, Patteson was killed. The people of Nukapu apparently later realized they had made a mistake. When missionaries aboard *The Southern Cross* set out to retrieve Bishop Patteson, they discovered his body floating at sea in a canoe, covered with palm-leaf matting and with a palm-branch in his hand. This type of burial was a sign of respect. One of the missionaries described recovering the body.

[They] lifted the bundle wrapped in matting into the boat ... and laid [the body] across the skylight, rolled in the native mat, which was secured at the head and feet. The placid smile was still on the face; there was a palm leaf fastened to the breast, and when the mat was opened there were five wounds, no more. ... The wounds [included] one evidently given with a club, which had shattered the right side of the skull at the back, and probably was the first, and had destroyed life instantly, and almost painlessly; another stroke of some weapon had cloven the top of the head; the body was also pierced in one place; and there were two arrow wounds in the legs, but apparently not shot at the living man, but struck in after his fall, and after he had been stripped, for the clothing was gone, except but the boots and socks [31].

X. TAMATE

Although the majority of Melanesia's martyrs died during the early decades of the South Pacific missions, the killings continued into the twentieth century.

James Chalmers (1841-1901) was born into a working class family in Argyleshire, Scotland, which belonged to Scotland's Established Church. While still a teenager, Chalmers decided to become a missionary and, in 1861, he joined the City of Glasgow Mission. In Glasgow, Chalmers met the Reverend George Turner (1818-1891), who had served for many years in Samoa and had published extensively on his experiences [32]. Turner encouraged Chalmers to train with the London Missionary Society. In 1865, Chalmers completed his training, and was ordained as a Christian minister. He was given an assignment in Rarotonga, the most populous town and capital of the Cook Islands. He arrived in Australia in May 1866, and finally reached Avarua along the north-central coast of Rarotonga in early 1867.

The Reverend Chalmers made a special effort to assimilate local culture. When his ship arrived in Avarua's harbor a local man brought Chalmers ashore in a small boat. The local man asked the newcomer his name so he could announce it when they reached the shore. The man was unfamiliar with the name "Chalmers," so he loudly announced that "Tamate" had arrived. Unwilling to embarrass the man and wishing to adapt to his new environment, the Reverend Chalmers did not correct the error. Rather, he assumed the name Tamate and used it forever thereafter [33].

After spending a decade ministering to the Rarotongans, Tamate received a new assignment in New Guinea (Fig. 12). Tamate became one of the first outsiders to explore southern New Guinea and he published three well-received books about his experiences: *Work and Adventure in New Guinea 1877 to 1885* (1885), *Adventures in New Guinea* (1886), and *Pioneering in New Guinea* (1887). His final mission station was on Daru, a small island near the Fly River delta, just off New Guinea's southeastern coast. Tamate had first visited the Fly River region in 1893, but he found the local inhabitants to be unreceptive and unusually hostile [33]. In spite of this, Tamate was resolute about evangelizing to the inhabitants of the Fly River region [34].

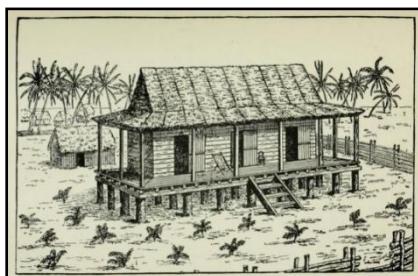


Figure 12

Tamate's house in Motu Motu, New Guinea, ca. 1889.

Public Domain.

In April 1901, Tamate sailed on the mission boat *The Niue* to Goaribari Island, approximately 100 km northeast of Daru. He was joined by fellow British missionary Oliver Fellows Tomkins (1873-1901), a Rarotongan teacher named Hiro, a chief from Kiwai Island, and ten boys from the Daru mission. *The Niue* anchored off Goaribari in the early morning of April 7, Easter Sunday. A group of local men rowed out and boarded the ship. They stayed until sunset and only went ashore after Tamate promised he would come visit their village the following day. Early the next morning, a much larger group of men returned and boarded *The Niue*. The ship's captain later recalled that the men "crowded the decks, so that there was no room to move," and they "resisted all efforts" to get them to leave [35]. Their canoes were filled with weapons of war: bows and arrows, clubs, bamboo knives, and spears [33]. To lure the warriors away from the ship, Tamate decided the mission party should go ashore in a whaleboat stocked with gifts. Tamate planned to return in just a couple of hours (Lovett 1903: 473), but he did not. *The Niue*'s crew waited in vain for two days for the mission party to return, before finally sailing back to Daru to file a report with the colonial authorities.

The British governor and a military force returned to Goaribari Island on the naval ship *Merrie England*. After repelling several attacks, British sailors captured a group of warriors from the village of Dopima. One of the warriors gave a detailed account of what had happened to Tamate and his party. As soon as the whaleboat reached the shore, it was looted. Warriors then attacked the missionaries with stone clubs. They cut off their heads, and butchered and ate their bodies. In retaliation for the massacre, the governor ordered his men to destroy all of the island's war canoes and to set fire to each village's *dubu*, or men's clubhouse. During this reprisal, at least twenty-four islanders lost their lives [35]. The governor retrieved Tamate's skull, which he enclosed in a cedar cabinet mounted with a silver shield. He returned the skull to the Daru mission station.

XI. CHARLES CHRISTOPHER GODDEN

The last western missionary killed in Melanesia was an Australian Anglican named Charles Christopher Godden (1876-1906). Godden's mission station was on Ambae Island in the New Hebrides; he ministered to the Omban people.

The Anglican Bishop John Patteson had visited Ambae Island in 1864, seven years before his death. Although Patteson was unaware of it, a few weeks before his visit, a western trader had shot and killed an Omban man, apparently believing the man had stolen some calico fabric. As was his custom, Bishop Patteson swam ashore and sat on the beach to teach about Christianity. Suddenly, a few of the Ombans who were

listening were startled; they abruptly jumped up and ran away. Patteson turned around just in time to see a local man advancing toward him with a raised club. Bishop Patteson decided not run. He held out some fish hooks as a gift and a token of peace. The would-be assailant paused for a moment, just long enough for a few of the other men to seize him and drag him away [36].

A generation after Bishop Patteson's narrow escape, an Ombanfisherman named Alamemea lived on Ambae Island, in the Lombaha region near the coastal village of Lowainasasa (modern Lolowai). At some point in the late 1890s, an Australian ship appeared in Lowainasasa's harbor, and blackbird traders took Alamemea away. During a lengthy sea voyage to Australia, the traders held Alamemea in the ship's stifling hold, chained to the floor. He watched as many other men died. Alamemea was forced to work on a sugarcane plantation in Queensland. His captors treated him cruelly, with violence. After Alamemea responded in kind, he spent time as a prisoner in a Queensland jail. Eventually, the blackbirders took Alamemea back to Ambae Island and he returned to the Lombaha region. He vowed to get revenge for his mistreatment by killing the first white man he saw in his village.

Charles Christopher Godden was born in 1876 in the Australian state of Victoria. He studied at Moore College in Sydney and became an ordained Anglican priest in 1900. The Reverend Godden received further training at the Melanesian Mission on Norfolk Island, before going on to Lowainasasa in 1901.



Figure 13
The Reverend Godden and crew, Lowainasasa Bay, 1906.
Public Domain.

Although he had been warned about Alamemea, the Reverend Godden led a group from Lowainasasa to the Lombaha region on October 16, 1906 (Fig. 13). After baptizing several men in Lowainasasa's harbor, he went for a walk along the shoreline. As Godden stooped to remove a stone from his shoe, from a distance Alamemea aimed a musket and fired. The Reverend Godden fell and Alamemea ran forward and beat him with a stone axe. The men Godden had just baptized placed him in his boat and quickly paddled back to Lowainasasa. Just as they reached their destination, the Reverend Godden died. The Reverend's pregnant wife, Eva was distraught. She quickly buried her husband's remains (Fig. 14), then left for Australia, where she gave birth to a daughter named Ruth. French marines captured Alamemea and took him to Fiji to stand trial. After his conviction, Alamemea served a fifty-year prison term for murder [37].



Figure 14
The grave of Charles Christopher Godden.

Public domain.

XII. CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The Melanesian missionaries took part in one of history's great cross-cultural encounters. Demographic data reveals an extraordinary religious transformation that occurred in the South Pacific over the past two centuries. Surveys indicate that in 2020, 96 percent of Polynesians, 93 percent of Micronesians, and 92 percent of Melanesians self-identify as Christian [38]. These are among the highest percentages in the world. This brief essay merely touches on the life stories of a few of the early agents of change, those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their service. Each of the missionaries discussed lost his or her life under distinctive circumstances, but there were common contributing factors. The missionaries' limited sensitivity to local traditions played a role, as did the local residents' resentment of blackbirding, the ravages of new diseases, and other problems associated with colonialism. This essay could only address these issues in a fleeting way. Perhaps in the future, an historian will produce a book-length manuscript, of greater breadth and depth, which will increase our understanding of the Christian martyrs of Melanesia and the South Pacific region.

REFERENCES

- [1] M. Lampert, *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the global south* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 499-500.
- [2] J. Taylor, *Jean-Claude Colin: reluctant founder 1790-1875* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2018), 170.
- [3] M. Hassett, "Martyr," in *The Catholic encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).
- [4] *Thayer's Greek lexicon* (Biblesoft, 2011). Retrieved from <https://biblehub.com/thayers/3144.htm>.
- [5] V. Smith, *Literary culture and the Pacific: nineteenth-century textual encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1998), 39-41.
- [6] G. Vason and J. Orange, *Life of the late George Vason of Nottingham* (London: J. Snow, 1840), 40-42.
- [7] M. L. Tjoa-Bonatz, Idols and art: missionary attitudes toward indigenous worship and the material culture on Nias, Indonesia, 1904–1920, in T. D. DuBois (Ed.) *Casting faiths* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 105-128.
- [8] P. Phan and E. Padilla, *Christianities in migration: the global perspective* (New York: Springer, 2016), 125.
- [9] J. Maretu, *Cannibals and converts: radical change in the Cook Islands* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1983)
- [10] E. W. Docker, *The blackbirders: a brutal story of the Kanaka slave-trade* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1981).
- [11] A. K. Langridge, *Won by blood: the story of Erromanga [sic]: the martyr isle* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1922), 17, 30-40, 50-58, 79, 95-96.
- [12] J. Ellis, *John Williams: the martyr missionary of Polynesia* (Kilmarnock, 1890), 127.
- [13] A. MorrellNaupa (Ed.), "Traditional life," in *Nompienovoteme Erromango* (Kastom and culture of Erromango). (Port Vila: Erromango Cultural Association, 2011), 94.
- [14] E. Prout (Ed.), *A narrative of missionary enterprise in the South Sea Islands by the Rev. John Williams* (London: John Snow, 1845), 161-163.
- [15] J. Flexner, *An archaeology of early Christianity in Vanuatu: kastom and religious change on Tanna and Erromango, 1839–1920* (Sydney: ANU Press, 2016), 23-24.
- [16] J. Barker, "Secondary conversion and the anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia," *Archives des Sciences Sociales de Religion*, 157(1), 67-87.
- [17] J. D. Gordon, *The last martyrs of Erromango: being a memoir of the Rev. George N. Gordon and Ellen Catherine Powell, his wife* (Sydney: Wentworth Press, 2009), 45-46, 109, 178-179, 182-187.
- [18] G. W. Trompf, *Melanesian religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [19] H. A. Robertson, *Erromanga [sic]: the martyr isle* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1902), 134.
- [20] W. J. Stuart and A. Ward (Eds.), *Ever your dear brother, Peter Chanel: surviving letters and Futuna journal* (Rome: PadriMaristi, 1960), 125, 431.

- [21] “St. Peter-Louis-Marie Chanel,” in *The Catholic encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). Retrieved from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11769a.htm>.
- [22] C. Rozier, *S. Pierre Chanel d'apresceux qui l'ontconnu* (Rome, 1991), 77–78.
- [23] B. Quin, “The story of Peter Chanel’s ‘relics’” (2020). Retrieved from <https://peterchanel.info/relics.htm>.
- [24] H. Laracy, “Pierre Chanel of Futuna (1803-1841): the making of a saint,” in Watriama and Co., *Further Pacific Islands portraits* (Canberra: ANE Press, 2013), 1-32.
- [25] M. Wallis, *The Fiji and New Caledonia journals of Mary Wallis, 1851-1853* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 1914), xxxix.
- [26] R. Wiltgen, “New Caledonians put the Marists to flight: 18 July 1847,” in R. Wiltgen (Ed.), *The founding of the Roman Catholic Church in Oceania 1825 to 1850* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 463-473.
- [27] J. Faramond, “despatch of 30 April 1846,” correspondence commerciale, Sydney (1842–1847), Archives Diplomatiques, Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres, Paris (trans. H.L.).
- [28] C. E. Fox, *Sermon by Canon Charles Elliot Fox on the occasion of the centenary of the consecration of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, February 24, 1961* (Project Canterbury). Retrieved from http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/fox_patteson1961.html.
- [29] H. A. Page, *Noble workers* (London: Dalby, Isbister& Co, 1875), 36-37, 43-45.
- [30] “Patteson, John Coleridge,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 20 (1911). Retrieved from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Patteson,_John_Coleridge.
- [31] C. M. Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson: missionary Bishop of the Melanesian islands* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1874).
- [32] G. Turner, *Nineteen years in Polynesia* (London: Snow, 1861).
- [33] R. Lovett, *James Chalmers: his autobiography and letters* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903), 371-412, 473.
- [34] W. Robson, *James Chalmers: missionary and explorer of Rarotonga and New Guinea* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1887).
- [35] C. S. Ross, Tamate, *The apostle of the Papuan Gulf* (Melbourne: M. L. Hutchinson, 1903), 162-163.
- [36] F. Coombe, *Islands of enchantment: many-sided Melanesia* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1911), 19-20.
- [37] J. Mala and J. Harris, *Vatu maraga (Stepping stone): the life and death of a martyr, Charles Christopher Godden, 1876-1906* (Vanuatu Lowainasa Community Progress Association, 2014).
- [38] Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Center for the Study of Global Christianity, *Christianity in its global context, 1970–2020: society, religion, and mission* (South Hamilton, Mass., 2013). Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20130815184022/http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>.