

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I write in response to the article written by Ewan Stilwell in your recent issue of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*. I appreciated reading this article, and its recognition of the importance of the Tongan-Fijian contribution to the missionary movement in Oceania. Nevertheless, a number of features in Stilwell's article are disturbing, from a scholarly point of view. In particular, I wish to mention *four* areas that were of particular concern to me, as a student of Fijian church history:

- (a) A missiological perspective, however worthy, in our understanding of Christian history, must engage with historical narrative, and their sources, as found in major historical texts. Alan Tippett and Fione Latukefu (though probably not John W. Burton) are important for a study of early Tonga and Fiji. Equally, too, are the following readily-available texts:

John Garrett, *To Live among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, Suva Fiji: IPS/USP, 1982.

A. Harold Wood, *Australia Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Work in Tonga* (vol I), and *Australia Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Work in Fiji* (vol II), Melbourne Vic: Aldersgate Press, 1978.

A. Thornley, *The Inheritance of Hope: John Hunt, Apostle of Fiji*, Suva Fiji: IPS/USP, 2000.

Geoff Cummins: "Holy War: Peter Dillon and the 1837 massacres in Tonga", in *The Journal of Pacific History* 12-1/2 (1977).

Without reference to this material, Stilwell's article lacks conviction, and struggles to understand the reality of Christian conversion in Tonga and Fiji.

- (b) Stilwell argues that revival in Tonga was general, while, in Fiji, it was specific (p. 24). This is not the case. Revival in Tonga was particularly evident on the northern island of

Vava'u in 1834. King George Taufa'ahau harnessed the crusading impulses of this revival to extend his political power throughout Tonga. This involved a military struggle with Tongatapu, a process most convincingly interpreted, in Old Testament terms, by Geoff Cummins. Evidence of religious revival on the populous island of Tongatapu is far outweighed by the impact of traditional, chiefly rivalries.

- (c) Thirdly, Stilwell accepts Tippet's argument that persecution was widespread in Fiji (p. 25). But Tippet's sources are very vague on this matter, and such a deficiency remains a serious criticism of Tippet's own use of sources. The missionary literature in Fiji – in particular, the journals of John Hunt, James Calvert, Richard Lyth, and Thomas Williams, reveal a low incidence of actual religious persecution, even though threats of persecution were made. This aspect of “threat”, or “bluff”, remains an important cultural aspect of chiefly strategy in Fiji. Often the deaths, of which Tippet speaks, occurred as a result of traditional, chiefly wars, which were evident in Fiji between 1835 and 1865. Sometimes, as an outcome of these wars, a chief and his people would convert. I stress, however, that nowhere is there evidence of what Tippet rather dramatically refers to as “many thousands” of Christians “massacred, eaten, enslaved, or killed” (quoted on p. 25).
- (d) Finally, Stilwell argues (p. 29) that Fijians came from a “non-missionary tradition”. This is palpably untrue. The Fijian converts of the eastern island of Lau, the southern island of Kadava, and the central districts of Viwa, and eastern Viti Levu went as missionaries – from 1840 to 1870 – to many other parts of Fiji, notably to the interior, and west of Viti Levu, and to the northern islands of Vanua Levu and Taveuni. By 1875, Fiji converts well understood the concept of missionary service, and a tradition was well in place.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Andrew Thornley.