

Excursus C : power encounter and iconoclasm

From the beginning Bataillon and Joseph-Xavier on the island of Wallis, had been very open about their *lotu*. They prayed and worshipped where everyone could see them, and where possible they stressed the difference between their *lotu* and the religion of the Methodist missionaries in Tonga. But they had cautiously refrained from openly saying that they had come to convert the island. On one occasion Bataillon had shown a bold front. In January, when the *Lavelua* once made fun of the god of the missionaries, Bataillon warned him to beware: who knows but our God's hand will strike your island! A few days later a cyclone blew down two thirds of the houses and many fruit-trees. People attributed the disaster to Bataillon's God and they blamed the *Lavelua*. It shook their convictions even more when they found out that the catechumens' island Nukuatea had not suffered much damage. The catechumens felt confirmed. The king was upset but he hid his feelings and went on as before.

The experience jolted Bataillon himself too. Six months later, he admitted he had acted: '(...) by I don't know what sort of instinct'.¹ He soon discovered that the event had given him an aura of taboo that inspired fear and respect, and he thanked the Lord.²

The experience made him bolder. Staying with Chanel on Futuna, after the visit of the *Reine de Paix*, Bataillon openly went into discussion with Niuliki about the ancestral religion and reduced him to silence.³ A few days later, he challenged the king to gather the *atua muri* on the island for him to burn. He then went round with Chanel and they did in fact burn at least one. Chanel was not happy. Not his style. Bataillon seems to have felt that Futuna was ripe for conversion, but that the gentle Chanel was too kind and therefore not getting anywhere. A few months later he wrote to Colin: 'The burnings and all we said to them on the subject, have weakened their belief in these follies, and given Father Chanel a great authority.'⁴

On Wallis as on Futuna Bataillon engaged – on a very small scale – in what later missiological literature has called *power encounter*⁵, the biblical archetype of which is Elijah at Mount Carmel challenging the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al.⁶

Church history is full of similar incidents, but, to limit ourselves to the Pacific, there is what happened during the rapid conversion of the Gambier Islands. In Lent 1834 *Maputeoa*, the high chief of Mangareva, had stood by when *Matua*, a priest of the old religion, had 'allowed the Picpus missionaries, surrounded by the people, to hack down the images of the old deities in the temple that he had given them for their worship'. When in 1835 Bishop Rouchouze arrived, he himself 'broke the coral idols with a heavy hammer as his followers processed and chanted in his train'.⁷ There is no mention of these happenings in the Marists' letters, meaning they did not hear of them – which seems very unlikely – or, they found it all a little distasteful.

¹ LRO, doc. 28 [24]: *Je ne sais par quel instinct*. It must have been the same cyclone (2 February) that destroyed Chanel's house. Bataillon's tells it in a more colourful language. Like Pompallier he often gets carried away by his own eloquence.

² LRO, doc. 28 [25].

³ Cf. above, p. 105.

⁴ LRO, doc. 38 [4].

⁵ A.R. Tippet, *Solomon Islands Christianity*, pp. 102ff.

⁶ 1 Kings 18, 20 – 40.

⁷ Garrett, *To Live among the Stars*, p. 91ff.

The Catholics were not the first in the field. In the 1810's, the Protestant missionaries burnt religious effigies in Tahiti. In 1822 Tahitian converts visited Hawaii and Queen Kaahumanu was so impressed by the account of the burnings that she brought many of the idols out of concealment and had them burned in the presence of her Tahitian guests.⁸ These stories too must have been known among the Picpus Fathers when the Marists visited them..

In 1829, in Tonga, Taufā`ahau, the tall and imperious high chief of Ha`apai, and a man of great daring, openly reviled his old gods and put their *mana* publicly to the test. He entered the shrine of an inspired priestess of his own shark god and struck her twice in the face. He then tried to spear a shark from his canoe, believing the shark to be the offended god. The shark got away and Taufā`ahau had two Methodist teachers thrown overboard to get the spear and bring it to the shore. When they did so unharmed, 'Taufā`ahau's determination to turn Christian was strengthened'.⁹ One can be sure that the story was all over Tonga, and Thomas Boag, who had lived on Vava`u and spoke the language, would surely have passed it on.

The surprising thing about the first Marist missionaries is not that Bataillon indulged in a little power encounter on Wallis and on Futuna, but that it plays so small a role in their approach to evangelization. There is no trace of it so far in the accounts of Pompallier and Servant from New Zealand.

Power encounters remained a not uncommon feature of Pacific missions. In the 1880's, in the Solomon Islands, Clement Marau, an Anglican deacon from the Bank Islands, was assigned to convert the island of Ulawa and 'he personally exposed the impotence of greatly feared local spirits by joining in the cutting down of a sacred grove'.¹⁰

On the island of Nggela the Anglican Charles Sapibuana, whom Bishop Patteson had taken to Norfolk Island in 1866 and returned to the village of Gaeta, gathered a small group of converts in his own kin-group. They were baptized in 1878. 'They let go their old superstition, and faced danger in the strength of a new religion, refusing to attend sacrifices, treading on forbidden ground where sickness once was found through fear, and doing things which once brought death'.¹¹

Honoré Laval, one of the Picpus missionaries involved in the conversion of Mangareva, justifies the smashing of the idols by comparing it with Constantine pulling down the pagan temples of ancient Rome. Garrett calls it: 'a memorable iconoclastic Pentecost, designed to dismay the anthropologists.'¹²

Tippett gives a well-balanced discussion of an issue that appals modern anthropologists, missiologists and observers in general. There can be no doubt that instances of power encounter and iconoclasm have destroyed valuable archaeological and anthropological material. He points out that in most cases indigenous people took the initiative themselves, even if they then asked, as often was the case, the foreign missionary to actually dispose of the sacred objects. 'We are confronted with changed lives – in mental set, in behaviour patterns and in spiritual satisfactions. It is a change

⁸ Garrett, op. cit. pp. 42ff.

⁹ Garrett, op. cit. p. 73.

¹⁰ Garrett, op. cit. p. 186

¹¹ Alfred Penny, *Ten Years in Melanesia*, London 1888, p. 185, quoted in Tippett, op. cit. p. 102.

¹² Garrett, op. cit. p. 92.

from fear to triumph. If the Melanesian chooses to demonstrate this by dismembering or burning his *tindalo* (...) or burying the skull of his ancestor, we ought to accept this at its face value - an act of faith and of victory'.¹³

Pacific cultures belong to the Pacific peoples and they are within their rights when they adhere to them and also when they change them. They are entitled to express this profound experience in whatever way they choose. Twenty-first century outsiders have no more right to condemn religious change than nineteenth century missionaries had the right to impose them. Tippet claims to have investigated hundreds of cases, and to have found only two or three in which a missionary was foolish enough to take the initiative.¹⁴ If he did not know about Bataillon on Futuna, that would be one more.

¹³ Tippet, op. cit., p. 108. *Tidalo* is the name given on Guadalcanal to the ancestral spirits and sometimes to objects that embody their presence.

¹⁴ Tippet, op. cit. p. 106.