

argument, and one that reinserts colonized peoples in historical experience. It is up to the ethnographers of the Pacific and elsewhere to rise to his challenge.

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*Melanesian Religion*, by Gary W. Trompf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. ISBN 0-521383-06-4, xii + 283 pp, plates, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US\$54.50.

Writing specifically as a religious historian, Gary Trompf unfolds a panoramic vision of Melanesian religions from "the old time," referring to pre-contact religions, to "the new time," occasioned by the advent of Christianity. The most interesting move comes in the third chapter, where Trompf focuses on "positive" and "negative reciprocity," exchange and payback, but as dimensions of *Melanesian religion broadly defined*. Payback bears on the "logic of retribution," the chapter's title, defined as "the way people think or reason about rewards and punishments" (51). By implication, Melanesian religious thought is basically ethical, a conclusion that also animates Burridge's *Mambu*: "Warfare and economic exchange can no longer be separated from traditional Melanesian religions because so much of life's vitality was gathered up in these activities" (205).

This opens up Melanesian religious studies to a consideration of "economics," "exchange," and "politics." By the same token, it threatens to marginalize more familiar topics (pollution, magic,

sacrifice, and so on). Disappointingly, Trompf pays far greater attention to negative than to positive reciprocity. Since a notion of retribution serves as an explanatory principle in terms of "trouble, sickness and death" (19), sorcery and related topics receive special attention; and the conventional foci of Melanesian religious studies are repriviledged. "Positive reciprocity" receives scant attention in comparison, though it is particularly in regard to ceremonial exchange that Trompf's rather global notion of religion could make an important contribution. His perspective motivates a new look at the relationship between quasi-capitalist, quasi-Christian forms (*bisnis* and *lotu*), for example. Trompf implies that Christianity has historically been a secularizing agent in Melanesia, since it has driven traditional religion underground (246) and carried with it a secular-rationalist-scientific cultural orientation. He also shows that cargo cults exemplify a resurgence of traditional religious-cum-ethical sensibility, and an implication of his argument is that seemingly secular transactional forms may be supported by religious values and principles (of reciprocity)—all of which suggests that contact has not always transformed Melanesian societies in "secular-rationalist" ways but has stimulated ritual innovation and religious "revitalization."

Although the book's title seems to invite generalization, Trompf distances himself from most existing generalizations, which he contradicts with sundry particulars, and offers few. There is the useful enunciation of the give-and-take principle as a religious theme. There is a more problematic insistence, inspired by Eliade, on the "rhythmic"

character of “Melanesian life”: “one can feel its pulse in the beat of a *kundu* (drum), the swayings of a mask or the chant of a dancing warrior” (200). Trompf’s suggestion that Melanesians have a “religious understanding” of time (192) is intriguing. But his claim (after Eliade) that time is construed as cyclical supports a problematic notion of a shift from “archaic” to “modern” thought-belief occasioned by contact, conversion, secularization, and so on, that is not anywhere empirically substantiated.

Throughout, Trompf casts aspersions on social science. He implies, for example, that anthropologists and sociologists have been typologizing to death what remains an enchanted, vibrant reality. He writes that they have been avoiding developing “more complex, multiform lines of explanation or . . . admitting that, in the final analysis, they are in the presence of a virtually unmanageable complexity” (190). Social scientific analysis is reductive, a matter of “one-track explanations” (191). Instead of caricaturing social science in the name of a superior history of religion approach, the stronger move would have involved acknowledging shared goals and the need for interdisciplinarity.

The topic Trompf especially emphasizes, syncretism, lends itself well to such interdisciplinarity. Trompf argues that since “there are many ‘correspondences’ between the Christian and . . . the . . . ‘traditional’, it will always be healthy to permit constructive interaction between the two pressures, so that the members of an open culture can be given the freedom to justify their cultural expressions” (264). Cargo cults

become a premier exemplification of the principle, for they display “the continuing influence of significant elements in traditional religions, elements which also have a strong bearing on the relative degree of response to Christianity in particular and colonial intervention in general” (201). This theme of syncretism surfaces again in the last chapter, which takes a more activist stance and summons nationals to Melanesianize Christianity. While Trompf implies that this task is especially urgent in the postcolonial era, and that the responsibility properly belongs to an emerging national elite, it strikes me—and Trompf’s text amply demonstrates the fact—that the Melanesianization of Christianity has been underway for many years, in colonial no less than in contemporary times, and among village *kanaka* and not only among educated national elites. Melanesian Christianity is already richly pluralized.

This book offers no new grand theory. Its strengths lie in the range of topics it explores, its compilation of information and analyses that might otherwise have remained scattered and inaccessible (in regard to the discussion of independent churches in particular), and in a certain unusual yet suggestive vision of Melanesian religion as a “total system” (Trompf himself does not use this term). Its agenda—to study the *history* of Melanesian religions—is also important. Mobilized in the service of such a history are: the entire anthropological literature on traditional religions (sometimes treated with disdain), the history of missions in the region, the literature on cargo cults, and a newer attention to Melane-

sian Christianity. Trompf's text reinforces the message that the days of "thick description" and unadulterated structural analysis are over, and it

raises the curtain on a historical anthropology of Melanesian religion.

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