

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

In his study of Victorian social theory, J. W. Burrow points out that the ". . . history of ideas is not necessarily like the old school history books, a record of victories."<sup>1</sup> It is an opinion that has particular relevance for a study of the Melanesian Mission. The Mission had few clear-cut "victories" in the intellectual sphere if by that one means the creation of a mission theory and methodology that allowed for both the successful propagation of the faith and a complete recognition of the intrinsic value of the "other" and his world. Arguably, these aims may be, if not mutually exclusive, at least mutually limiting. Those who saw mission "success" in terms of numbers of conversions, substantial social change, or providing indigenes with the means to adapt to a changing world were less than enthusiastic about the Mission's long-range goals and its cautious approach to change. Those same goals and methods have, conversely, been rendered suspect in the eyes of other critics by the Mission's fundamental purpose--the establishment of an alien belief system.

But in terms of our understanding of both Victorian intellectual life and the process of cultural contact, the Mission's attempt at such an integration may be of more significance than an evaluation of its relative "success" or "failure" in terms of criteria it did

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<sup>1</sup>J. W. Burrow, Evolution and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. xii.

not always recognize. The ability to assign value to the "other" and his culture and to allow for that value even when introducing change had a problematic history in European society. At least a few Victorians, however, were not only capable of such recognition but actively sought to practice "accommodation of value" in their dealings with indigenous peoples. That they could do so was a factor of the interaction of the intellectual discourses available to them; an interaction that, for the leadership of the Melanesian Mission, produced more overlap and reinforcement than conflict and tension.

The principal point of reference for these particular Victorians remained Christianity. But different discourses existed within Christianity itself. The High Church Anglicanism of nineteenth-century England provided precedents for accommodation and compromise, patience, and belief in the efficacy of many kinds of knowledge. In many respects, it proved, despite its association with conservatism and the English establishment, potentially more receptive to intellectual change than its Evangelical counterpart. It was not by chance that the most sophisticated efforts of English Christianity at meeting the intellectual challenges of the mid-nineteenth century were formulated by men associated with the Anglican tradition. The Liberal Anglicans, in turn, found much in secular knowledge--particularly in history, philosophy, philology, and even science--to support their expanded vision of the faith.

Because the leadership of the Melanesian Mission participated in the attempt at Christian restatement, they were comfortable with the methodology of the new social science of anthropology, which drew

from many of the same intellectual sources utilized by the Liberal Anglicans. The new "secular" science itself, indeed drew from multiple discourses, many of them shared with those convinced of the on-going worth of things religious. Finally, the first-hand experience of determined Christians in the mission field, through their interchange with the leading anthropologists of the era, affected the evolution of that discipline's view of the proper approach to primitive culture.

In the final analysis, then, a tidy classification system in which science and religion perform like "balloon duelists," obscurantists missionaries do battle with enlightened anthropologists, and self-confident Europeans impose Christianity and Civilization willy-nilly on helpless indigenes breaks down. An over-reliance on these simplified versions of complex processes and events only serves to confuse. Anyone attempting to arrive at a reasonable accurate understanding of Victorian intellectual life and its role in cultural contact would be well-advised to remember the cautionary words Peter Gay included in the opening pages of his own massive study of Victorian society:

The need to live by secure, sharply etched classifications is buried deep in the human mind and one of its earliest demands; simplicity allays anxieties by defeating discriminations. Real situations are rarely clear-cut, real feelings often nests of ambivalence. This is something the adult learns to recognize and to tolerate, if he is fortunate; it is a strenuous insight from which he will regress at the first opportunity. That is why the liberal temper, which taught men to live with uncertainties and ambiguities, the most triumphant achievement of nineteenth-century culture, was so vulnerable to the assaults of cruder views of the world . . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1:31.