

NEW RELIGIONS IN TRUK STATE

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Introduction

Ever since the time the foreigners gained a foothold in Micronesia, Truk's population has been nearly divided evenly between the Protestant Evangelical Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant missionaries came to Truk in 1879 and were followed by the Catholics ten years later in 1889.¹ However, not until the early 1960's did other religions departing from the Evangelical and Roman traditions land in Truk. First came the Jehovah Witness missionaries in 1964, followed by the Seventh-Day Adventist in 1976, the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (Mormons) in 1977, and the Apostolic missionaries in 1983. Each of these religions has its own center of belief and differ from the Catholic and original Protestant religions. Of course, the Protestant and Catholic faiths remain major in Truk but the new religions are gaining members - but why? The following report hopes to answer this question by giving an outline of the history and beliefs of these religions and then a description of their goals and work in Truk.

Jehovah Witness

"Jehovah Witnesses started in Pennsylvania in the 1870's by a man named Charles Taze Russell. Russell was a Presbyterian and later became a Congregationalist. He lost his faith as a young man when he could not reconcile the mercy of God and the doctrine of eternal punishment. A further study of the Bible convinced him that the traditional Christian doctrines of the Trinity and hell were false and made him begin preaching his own version of Christianity in 1872. Russell established small Bible study groups around the nation and wrote many pamphlets. In 1879 he started the magazine, Watchtower, which the Jehovah Witnesses use to spread their message. After Russell's death, Joseph F. Rutherford became his successor. The followers had been known as Earnest Bible Student, Russellites, Millennial Dawnist, and Rutherfordites until Rutherford gave the organization a new name "Jehovah Witness" which was taken from the American standard version of the Bible (Isaiah 43:12 "You are my witness, said Jehovah, and I am your God."). These people claimed that Abel was the first of Jehovah's Witness and they used the Hebrew 11,12:1 as their source.

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the doctrine of Trinity. They believe that Christ was once an angel (Michael), became a perfect man, and is now God's chief lieutenant. They also believe that the Holy Spirit is not a person but simply an expression which means the power of God. These people believe that God's war of Armageddom will rid the earth of all wickedness and resurrect the righteous dead. A total of 144,000 men and women will reign with Jesus as Spirit creatures in heaven. They use Revelation 14:1-3 as their source."² Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that there will be a destruction of the earth because they believe that God will make paradise on earth for people to live. They believe that the Sabbath was only for the Jews but for them there is none (Deut. 5:15). They also believe that the Gospel should be preached to all nations.

Thus, in 1964 two Jehovah Witness missionaries landed in Truk. The two missionaries, Paul and Lillian Williams, were from the United States of America. Being foreigners, these missionaries found many problems in

organizing their religion in Truk. The main problem was that the majority of people seemed not to welcome their religion. When these missionaries first came to them in their homes, people either made excuses that they were busy, or they just closed their doors. Since the people were already members of either the Catholic or the Protestant Churches, they looked upon these new missionaries with suspicion. Of course, language was another problem but the Williams did manage to handle it. In order to have baptized followers, they set up their traditional house to house work where they visited homes and read to interested people passages from the Bible and explained the meaning of each passage. Besides their house to house work, they also set up Home Bible studies for any convinced Trukese who wished to learn more. More than anything in their discussions, they stressed that the world would soon come to an end which they base on Matthew 24:3-14. When they gained members, they further trained them through their "Theocratic Ministry School" and Service Meetings. Their "Theocratic Ministry School" is held every Saturday, and there each person gives a Bible talk and learns how to use the Scriptures to answer his/her personal questions, for instance, Where do we go after we die?, Is there any hell?, etc. They also continue these classes in people's homes. The Jehovah Witnesses insist that Christians must give public testimony to Scriptural truth (Heb. 13:15); and thus, they make great strides in having personal contact with people. Their Service meetings are held on Sundays, and during these meetings they share magazines, books, pictures, and encourage each other in their house to house work.

Though the missionaries are mostly from the United States, today the Jehovah Witness Church has forty-three (43) Trukese who are baptized into their religion. Almost all of these followers have come from the Protestant Church. These people have joined this religion for several reasons. First, they hold that as Jehovah Witnesses they have learned more about the Bible than in their former religion. Secondly, the people feel they have found more freedom in joining the Jehovah Witness Church. They also like the religion because the missionaries come to the people instead of

the people going to them, and they, the members, are the missionaries, unlike their former religions. Some of them, like the children and young men and women, have joined because friends and relatives are members. However, nearly all mentioned that they became Witnesses because they want to live strictly according to the Bible. They believe that in strictly following what the Bible says is what God wants people to do.

In attracting followers, these missionaries have some specific goals and commitments to achieve. First, they want to make changes in people's personalities, to conform to "God's Standards" (Eph. 4:20-24 and Gal. 5). To them "God's Standards" are both physical and spiritual. Physically, you don't kill, steal, commit fornication, etc. (The Ten Commandments). In the spiritual manner, a person must be honest, kind, and loving (the spirit or the Law). These people are trying to share their "Good News" of the Kingdom of God which stated that God's Kingdom will come in our life time to remove all wickedness and to restore Paradise on earth.

Lastly, from a literal translation of the Bible, certain restrictions are placed on all members. Blood transfusions, addictive drugs, and food with blood are forbidden to Jehovah Witnesses. They are based on Acts 15:28-29; however, they believe drinking alcohol is seen in a more temperate view from the Bible. They hold that it does not say Christians cannot drink, rather they quote 1 Tim. 5:23 where it says; "Do not drink water only but take a little wine to help your digestion since you are sick so often." Thus, able to quit smoking and temperant in their drinking habits; people feel faithful to their new religion.

Seventh-Day Adventist

"The Seventh Day Adventist church originated in the 1800's when many people in America and Europe were drawn to the doctrine of Christ's second coming. References in the Bible that seemed to prophesy the coming of Christ aroused people's interest. William Miller, a Baptist minister, and and some followers even predicted a definite time for Christ second coming

but their interpretation proved wrong. Another group restudied the Bible prophecies and decided that what had happened was just the beginning of the judgement in heaven that is to precede Christ's second coming. This group was then organized in 1863 and called themselves the Seventh-Day Adventist."³

Their name, Seventh-Day Adventist, was of course, taken from what they believe. The "Seventh-Day" comes from their time of worship. Based on their Biblical studies, they believe that Saturday is the seventh day and Sunday is the first day; thus, they bless Saturdays as their Sabbath Day and work on Sundays as a regular day. Adventist is from the word "Advent," the expected second coming of Christ.

Like some other Protestant sects, they do not believe the breaking of bread as changing into the body of Christ, but they believe it is a memorial of Christ's time on earth. Unlike Catholics, they hold that confession is not needed as long as one asks God for his own forgiveness through personal prayers.

In 1976 the first Seventh-Day Adventist missionary landed in Truk. He was a Filipino by the name of Eban Aguirre. Eventhough Aguirre initially confronted difficulties in getting people interested in his religion, he did succeed in his work as a missionary. He was able to attract some followers; as a result, other missionaries came and continued his work. Though missionaries are now mainly from the United States, they still follow Aguirre's method in gaining followers. They set up public meetings for those who are interested to come and listen, especially for people whom they befriend. At these meetings they talk about the importance of understanding the Bible and believing in Jesus Christ. They also talk about how to be saved and how to get to heaven by teaching people how to accept Jesus as their Savior, to follow all that Jesus said in the Bible, repentance of their sins, baptism by immersion, and a true knowledge of the Ten Commandments. They also talk about "God's final message" (Rev. 14:6-12): "Honor God and praise His Greatness...", which means you have to worship God alone and nothing or no one else is to have this honor. Above all,

they stress the second coming of Christ like the Jehovah Witnesses. In attracting more followers, they have set up a school and have a scheduled weekly radio program. The school is operated by the mission and it is free to those who cannot afford it as long as they are members of the religion. The radio program runs for thirty minutes every Saturday afternoon.

As of now, there are about forty (40) Trukese who have been baptized into this religion. Again, these people are mostly from the Protestant Church. Some are poor people, others are friends of the missionaries, and still others are people who have problems with alcohol and cigarettes. All these people have joined the Seventh-Day Adventists for several reasons. Primarily, it seems that they like the concern shown in the help that is given to them. Secondly, they possess a desire to live strictly on the Bible like the missionaries. They believe that living a life based strictly on the Bible helps them in their problems with liquor and cigarettes. Thus, having their problems solved, they have grown more faithful to this religion.

Having followers does not stop the missionaries from their work. They have set up a training program for converts. This is done through a series of Bible studies done at people's homes. They want to make the people accept Jesus Christ as their Savior by preaching more to them from the Bible. They especially hope to have the Trukese people ready for Christ's second coming. To do so, they are not only preparing their people spiritually and mentally, but they are also looking after people's physical needs and problems. They want to help the people in the community who need help. This is done by teaching good health habits and supporting the people with their physical needs. In their program, they give valuable information on how to stop smoking, chewing betelnuts, and drinking alcoholic or caffeinated beverages.

However, eating pork is restricted according to their Biblical studies. They believe that to keep the body which they consider to be the temple of God clean, they must not eat unclean animals like pig. However, this strict adherence to Biblical* dietary laws goes against the culture because eating pork in Truk is used for special communal occasions like parties, weddings, etc. Nonetheless, the followers of this religion care less about their culture in this area because of the concern shown in the help that the religion offers.

* Old Testament

The Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (Mormon)

"During the early 1800's, Joseph Smith, son of a New England farmer, received a series of divine revelations. According to Smith's account, God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him near Palmyra, New York, in 1820 advising him not to join any existing church but to start a new religion. Smith was visited later by an angel named Moroni and was told about a golden plate on which the history of early people of the Western Hemisphere was engraved in an ancient language. Smith found the golden plate in 1827 on Cumora, a hill near Palmyra, and his translation of the plate, Book of Mormon, was established in 1830. In the Book of Mormon, it tells how the Western Hemisphere was settled by a tribe called the Jaredites after the confusion of tongues at Babel. It also records the history of the Nephrites who came from Jerusalem to America in about 600 B.C. According to the book, Jesus Christ came to America after his resurrection and established the true church among the Nephrites, who died out in about 420 A.D. The last custodian of their sacred writing was Moroni, son of the Prophet Mormon, and it was he who hid the golden plate to await the rise of a new race of believers. Joseph Smith and his associates found the church on April 6, 1830."⁴

The Mormons believe that God initially created all people as spirit children before the earth was made. They claim that Jesus Christ created the world under the direction of God the Father and that is why they also

called Jesus, the Creator. The Mormons also teach **Triditine** faith in God **father**, Son, and the Holy Ghost. Thus, they believe that they are three separate individuals. Moreover, there are two doctrines unique to the Mormon Church -- the baptism of the dead and celestial marriage. The baptism of the dead was instituted to provide salvation for those who did not hear the Gospel before death. This is achieved by filling out a form; giving the person's name, birth, and date of death; and then they submit the form to their Temple. The celestial marriage is a ceremony in which the couple are considered married for eternity.

On July 7, 1977 Elder Dan Baldwin from Hawaii and Torlik Tima from the Marshalls came to Truk as the first Mormon missionaries. Later on, missionaries from the United States and Gilberts started to flow onto Moen Island with their goals and commitments, to baptize all the people in the name of Jesus Christ, to strengthen people to be good Christians, and even to die for the church. However, like the other new sects, they faced a few problems when they landed in Truk. They had difficulties with the language. Another problem they faced was that the chiefs of the islands did not accept them. In fact, the chief of Dublon requested that the Mormons leave his island. Nevertheless, some common people were willing to listen to them. However, in their proselytizing, they found that some of the restrictions of their church were against the acquired custom of the island,--for instance, no drinking caffinated or alcoholic beverages, and no smoking cigaretted.

Despite the cultural difficulties, the Mormon Church was able to attract three hundred ten (310) people on Moen Island, the Truk District Center. Their main way of interesting people is also by house to house work where they ask individuals if they want to hear about their church. If people welcome them into their homes, they will try to train them to become the members of their church. In training people, the Mormons stress Bible study. They especially stress the Ten Commandments. They also recommend that the people should go to church every Sunday at their

9:00 a.m. services, should stop smoking cigarettes and marijuana, should stop drinking alcohol, and should stop chewing betelnut. They also forbid tattoos on the body. If a person has tattooed himself already and wants to join the church, they discourage him from doing it anymore. When the people are ready to become full members of their church, they baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ by full immersion in water. Another way of attracting people to their church is by their Youth Program. In this program they set up activities (basketball, baseball, and volleyball) for young people. There are about thirty (30) youths currently involved in this program. The equipment for the activities is provided by the Mormon Church headquarters on Guam and Hawaii.

Based on interviews, people have joined the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints for several reasons. Some people found the religion helpful because it does not allow them to smoke cigarettes or marijuana, drink alcohol; and this abstinence promised them a beginning to eternal life. Moreover, they found themselves in good health when they did these things. Another reason given in the interviews for joining the religion was because parents and relatives are in the religion. However, everyone held that they joined because everything the Mormons practice is based on the Bible. Lastly, Bible study was cited as the reason for membership. Again, people felt that they learned more about Scripture than when they were in their old religion. Bible study classes are held on every Sunday. Again, passages from the Bible are read and then explained to the people.

The Apostolic Church

The Apostolics broke away from the Assembly of God because they do not believe that there are three persons in one God but hold three manifestations of the one God. This separation occurred in 1898 in the state of Kansas, U.S.A. Like their parent group, the people of this religion get their beliefs principally from the Bible. They strictly adhere to everything the Bible says, for they believe the Bible is literally true. Unlike the Mormons, they use no other book or traditions.

As for their religious practices, since the Apostolics believe that there is no Trinity and that Jesus, alone, is God, they stray from their rigid Biblical adherence and baptize only in the name of Jesus. In their theology, they equate justification with freedom from sin. Thus, in their morality, they stress in living for Jesus alone. They feel that they are the true successors of the first Christians among all the other churches which are working in the world today. From the interviews, the idea was gotten that they felt their church is better than the Protestant and Catholic Churches because nearly everything they do or say has a firm Biblical reference. To support this view, they offer baptism of immersion as an example that they alone are historically and scripturally correct.

The Apostolic Church arrived in Truk in 1983. It was brought in by Mr. Harry Daitas, a native of Nama Island, an outer island of Truk. He converted to his religion while he was attending college in the United States. Now he is in Truk State as a full-time missionary with a few Americans assisting him in his work.

Like all the recently-arrived religions in Truk, the Apostolic Church attracts people by its home Bible study which is chiefly conducted by Pastor Daitas. They stress home Bible study because they believe that they have the "second blessing" where the "spirit" of Jesus guides them in their Biblical research and prayer. In having this Bible study, people again reported that they understand more about the Bible now than when they were in their old religion. The pastor also has a program for converts where the doctrines of their church and the rules for right living are taught. It seems that converts in this church are mostly relatives and friends of current members and the pastor. People interviewed also reported that they feel that the Apostolic Church is more religious than all the other religions in Truk because all its language is Biblical. They all adhere to the thought that if they strictly follow what the Bible says, they will be closely united with Jesus.

The goal of this group is to have people converted to a "religious life" and to live for Jesus alone. In living for Jesus alone, certain restrictions are placed on their lives. In fear that they might be swayed from their basic commitment to Christ, movies, smoking, drinking, and dancing are not allowed. These restrictions were seen as another reason for why some people joined this church.

Like the Mormons, the Apostolic Church possesses some practices that are unique to its group. The Apostolic Church is basically a Pentecostal Church in its form of worship. People raise their hands in prayer, and at Baptism by immersion received the gift of tongues, (glossalalia). Like other Pentecostal groups, they believe if their faith is strong, they can even be healed of disease.

The Apostolic Church has had a positive affect on its members. The Bible study program has taught people to speak publically which they have never done before. The group is also closely knit whereby members help one another in building or other manual labor projects. It seems that this generous spirit of helping one's neighbor has been especially affective particularly with the young people.

Conclusion

New religions are now operating in Truk State and many of their goals and beliefs are akin to the conventional Protestant and Catholic Churches. Like the forerunners they are here to help people understand more about the Bible which currently enjoys great interest among the majority of the people. Like the others, they are here to aid people in accepting Jesus as their personal Savior. Lastly, they come like the Congregationalists, Catholics, and Leibenzell before them, to help the people in the community with their problems and to baptize the people in the name of Jesus Christ.

Though these new religions are churches in the Protestant tradition, they differ from the American Board Congregationalists and the Leibenzell Evangelicals who first evangelized the Truk islands to the Protestant faith. Some like the Jehovah Witnesses and the Seventh-Day Adventists want to convert people to a "religious life" so they may be ready for the second coming of Christ. Each church has come to preach their own interpretation of the "Good News" of the Kingdom of God by their door-to-door work, a practice which is not now customary in the established churches. Therefore, these new religions are not necessarily appreciated by members of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Not all members of Truk's traditional religions understand why these new religions arrived with their beliefs and practices that are different from theirs--especially when all Trukese are, at least nominally, Christians. As an example, some Trukese are bewildered by the Jehovah's Witnesses' idea of not observing the Sabbath at all. The Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists' restrictions of not taking food with blood poses another problem since in the culture almost everyone relishes raw fish (Sashimi). Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-Day Adventists do have the observance of the Sabbath Day; however, having their Sabbath Day on Saturdays causes confusion in some people's mind. Moreover, their restriction from eating pork creates another problem because pork is Micronesian's feast meat.

It appears that the new religions are meeting the needs of some of the people. It seems that these groups' stress on Bible studies is foremost in attracting people to them, for during the past years, there has arisen an earnest desire among both Catholics and Protestants to know more about God's word. Perhaps the second force that makes these religions attractive to people is their strict code of conduct based on Biblical law. Truk State has a problem with alcohol and marijuana. These religions' restrictions on addictive or intoxicating drugs or drinks are attractive to both individuals and families who have suffered under their ill affects.

Moreover, it appears that individual churches have practices or beliefs that fit into the culture. The Trukese have a strong sense of family unity. Perhaps the Mormon Church's belief in eternal marriages and baptism of dead loved ones are a boon in attracting some people to their group? Truk State has recently been hit from a cholera epidemic. Perhaps the Seventh-Day Adventist's concern for health care has attracted followers with Truk's current health problem? Likewise the Trukese set a value in education. Perhaps the work of the Seventh Day Adventist School has brought some members into their fold? Lastly, in the culture, it is not customary for the ordinary people to get up to speak their mind on any subject. Perhaps the Bible study programs of each of these churches and their stress on individual participation is a means of breaking down this cultural impediment, especially in the area of faith and religion which is so important to the Trukese people.

Besides Bible studies and strict laws on drink and drugs, the concern of some of these newly arrived religions for youth is probably the next important factor in attracting members. Of all the states in the F.S.M, Truk has the highest birth rate. Coupled with the high rate of unemployment and the misuse of alcohol and marijuana, the problems of youth are considered serious ones.

The Mormons have set up a recreation program for young people offering organized games of basketball, volleyball, etc. This gesture is greatly appreciated in Truk State where, as part of the developing nation of the Federated States of Micronesia, funds are directed to more basic and pressing needs of the state as education, health care, and road and water projects. Unfortunately, little money is available for recreational programs for idle young people.

Though the Apostolic Church has no recreational programs, per se, for young people, their effect on youth is still powerful. They have greatly involved young people into their community projects. Perhaps it can be said of all the new groups, the Apostolics have best reintegrated youth into the larger body of society according to traditional customs by their work projects.

On the other hand, though the Seventh Day Adventists have no program for youth as of yet, their school cannot be ignored. They are also contributing to the spirit of care towards the young people of Truk State.

In speaking about youth, nothing was said about the Jehovah Witnesses; but it should be noted that they too are having an effect on young people by their teachings. Perhaps it is safe to say that all the new religions are helping the young indirectly with their Christians teaching of love temperance and forgiveness. Young members of these churches who used to be heavy drinkers and smokers are now abstaining. Even young people who were formerly enemies are now on friendly terms with one another. However, it should be pointed out that with the exception of the Apostolic Church, youth membership is substantially small in these religions. Only the future can say if they will have any great impact on the young segment of Truk's population; however, it must be noted that these churches' future survival is greatly dependent on attracting young members.

Are the new churches of Truk a passing fad? Will their missions close like the Baptists under the pressure of strong communal bonds found in the members of the Congregationalist, Leibenzell, and Catholic Churches? Again only time can answer this question, but at the moment, it is safe to say, that their presence is surely felt in Truk State.

Notes

1. The protestant Church in Truk was originally founded by New England Congregation lists in the Pacific. From Hawaii, native and American missionaries moved southward into Micronesia - first into Kosrae and Ponepe (1852), then to the Marshalls (1855), and the Mortlocks (1874). In 1879, three Ponapean, one Mortlockese, and one American couple planted Christianity in Truk. (Francis Hezel S.J., "Castling The Net Further", Winds of Change, (Saipan, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands), Title IV - B), 1979 pp. 252-254.
2. William J. Whalen, "Jehovah's Witnesses" The Catholic Encyclopedia Volume V, John Harrington (ed), (N.Y., McGraw-Hill Book Co.) 1965, pp. 647-648.
3. Author unlisted, "Seventh Day Adventist" The World Book Encyclopedia Volume XVII, Richard Harmet (ed), Chicago, Ill., U.S.A., World Book-Childcraft International, Inc. 1979, pp. 256.
4. Richard E. Ward "Mormons" The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume VII, John Harrington (ed), (N.Y., McGraw-Hill Book Co.) 1965, pp. 349-353.

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