How God’s Spirit Worked a Revolution in Hawaii in 1819–1825

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From the 6th century B.C. the examples of King Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus teach us that God's purposes can be carried out by nonbelievers, pagans who do not know the Lord. The Lord said, “I call you [Cyrus] by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me” (Isa. 45:5). The Lord used both kings to discipline the disobedient Jews. Nevertheless, God still wanted Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus to learn that the Lord was the only sovereign or active in their success, even though they had not known that “the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals” (Dan. 4:25). In the 19th century A.D. the Lord also used several ruling women and men in Hawaii to ignite a spiritual and social and economic revolution. Pagan gods were outlawed, women were elevated, and the poor were financially relieved. God through these nonbelievers had prepared the way for Christian missionaries to spread the good news about Jesus, God among and for us.

When the Holy Spirit first dwelled permanently among believers, the Apostle Peter explained that God’s Spirit was poured out upon “all flesh” (Acts 2:17; quoting Joel 2:28):

And it will be in the last days, God says, I will pour out from my Spirit upon all flesh, and they will prophesy—your sons and your daughters—and your young—visions will view, and your elders—dreams will dream; and even upon my male slaves and upon my female slaves in those days I will pour out from my Spirit, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17–18 my trans.)

“All flesh” implies a democratic or nonhierarchical movement affecting sons and daughters, young and old, slave (or poor) and, by implication, also free (or wealthy). “All” will receive God’s Spirit. All will equally profess that no God exists but the one living Lord (Joel 2:27). Thus, when the Holy Spirit comes mightily upon a people we should expect men and women, young and old, poor and wealthy, all to be indwelt and as a result the society to be affected in its stratifications of gender and age and economy. Therefore, in the Book of Acts women such as Dorcas Tabitha (9:36–42), Mary (12:12), Lydia (16:14–15, 40), and Priscilla (18:2, 18, 26) take significant roles along with men. Young believers such as John Mark (13:5, 13; 15:37–38) and Timothy (16:1–3; 19:22; 20:4) take significant roles along with the elders. The poor get economic relief (2:44–45; 4:32–34; 11:29; 14:8–16). And, of course, “all” extends to those who are not Jewish such as the Ethiopian official (8:27–39), the Romans Cornelius (10:1–48) and Sergius Paulus (13:7–12) and the Philippian jailer (16:27–34).

All these aspects of God's working come into play in the "Acts-like" awakening in Hawaii. Let us review the dimensions of gender, age, and economics to recount the major events in this Hawaiian revolution: the scene in New England from a Christian perspective, the scene in Hawaii from a pre-Christian missionary perspective, and the scene in Hawaii from a post-Christian missionary perspective.

Important Dates for Hawaiian Christianity

1809 Henry Opukahaia (Obookiah, 1792–1818) and other Hawaiians reach New Haven, Conn.
1815 Opukahaia becomes a Christian and decides to become a missionary to his people. Hawaiians William Kanui (Tenoe) and Thomas Hopu also convert.
Feb. 1818 Opukahaia dies of typhus.
Oct. 1819–March 1820 A Christian missionary team of 17 (14 New Englanders and 3 Hawaiians) travel to Hawaii on ship Thaddeus.
Nov. 1819 After the death of Kamehameha I (Tamehameha), idolatry is forbidden by King Liholiho (Kamehameha II) (1795/6–1825) as advised by Queen Kaahumanu (co-ruler or "prime minister," younger wife of Kamehameha I, she died 1822) and Chief(ess) Keopuolani (mother of Kamehameha II, another wife of Kamehameha I, she died 1823) and others.
1823 Chief(ess) Keopulani is the first native Hawaiian (in Oahu) to be converted and baptized.
1824 Chief(ess) Kapiolani (1781–1840) of Kaawaloa overthrows goddess Pele.
1823–46 Christianity becomes the basis for the government in Hawaii.
1825 Queen Kaahumanu is baptized.
1837/8–43 27,000 people join the churches during a revival.
1848 The common people were endowed with lands during the reign of Kaukeaoauli (Kamehameha III) under co-ruler Chief(ess) Kinau.
1853, 1855 Hawaiian Christians send Hawaiians as missionaries to Marquesas Islands. (1850 Hawaiian Missionary Society is formed.)
1863 Hawaiian Evangelical Association takes over responsibility from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM).
The Scene in New England: Christian Perspective

In the Hawaiian Islands (formerly the Sandwich Islands) a young boy, Henry Opukahaia (Obookiah), lost both his parents during a time of war. His parents were murdered before his own eyes. When he tried to escape with his baby brother on his back, his brother was speared. But Opukahaia was not killed; he escaped. He was then cared for by his uncle, but he remained so sad, having lost all his close relatives, that in 1808–09 at the age of fourteen, along with another Hawaiian, Thomas Hopu, he decided to leave Hawaii. Captain Brintnall let Opukahaia pay for his passage by working on his ship and brought him to New Haven, Connecticut. Finding his way to Yale College, Opukahaia wanted to study so much, he wept bitterly. Rev. Edwin W. Dwight, a resident graduate at Yale, let him study with him. When Opukahaia no longer had a place to stay, a minister, Samuel J. Mills, took care of him and paid for his education. Eventually Opukahaia became a Christian and decided to go back again to Hawaii as a missionary to his own people. Why? He explained, “Hawaii gods! They wood—burn. Me go home, put ‘em in a fire, burn ‘em up. They no see, no hear, no anything. We make them. Our God, He make us.”

As a young boy, William E. Dodge heard Opukahaia speaking of his desire to return as a missionary to his own people and bring other Christians with him and he decided to plant “a missionary potato patch” to help him. Even though it was not a good growing season and the ground was swamp land, with his diligent cultivation and God’s grace, the garden yielded a fine crop. Dodge became one of the most generous givers to missions, being inspired by Henry Opukahaia.

Sadly, in 1818, Henry Opukahaia (at age 26) died of typhus. But Hiram Bingham, a student at Andover Seminary, volunteered to go in his stead and carry out Opukahaia’s plans for Hawaii. In 1820 Bingham went to Hawaii with seventeen other adult men and women, including several Hawaiians. The earliest missionary team was sent out from Park Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts.

The Scene in Hawaii: Pre-Christian Missionary Perspective

But, before these missionaries arrived (as a matter of fact, while they were on the six month boat ride there), a spiritual and cultural revolution occurred in Hawaii. Hawaii in the 1800s was a country of contrasts, the land had “romantic” and beautiful scenery, with a people of “primitive simplicity, natural vivacity, and fascinating manners.” Missionary and naturalist William Ellis in 1833 described the Hawaiians generally as tall, graceful, hospitable, stately, well formed, with fine muscular limbs, and open countenances who loved to canoe, swim, and surf. Despite these idyllic descriptions, Hawaii also had “one of the most cruel systems of idolatry that ever enslaved any portion of the human species.” Priests (kahunas) with chiefs and kings exercised control by an elaborate tabu (kapu) system. Women, the young, and the poor were most oppressed. To be “tabu” was to be “sacred” or separated from ordinary or common purposes. The priests imposed the tabus in conjunction with the civil authorities. Police officers appointed by the king enforced the tabus. Death was the penalty for breaking any tabu. Ellis explains:

The idols, temples, persons, and names of the king and members of the reigning family—the persons of the priests—canoes belonging to the gods—houses, clothes, and mats of the king and priests—and the heads of men who were the devotees of any particular idol—were always tabu, or sacred. The flesh of hogs, fowls, turtle, and several other kinds of fish, coconuts, and almost every thing offered in sacrifice, were tabu to the use of the gods and the men;...Particular places, as those frequented by the king for bathing, were also rendered permanently tabu. Women were restricted from involvement with the people, places, or items considered tabu. They could not eat bananas, coconuts, certain fish or pork, and other fruits or animals offered to the gods. They could not enter the hut built for the family idols and in which the men ate. Therefore, men and women were never allowed to eat together or even to have their food cooked in the same oven regardless of their rank or age. Ellis explains: “From its birth, the child, if a female, was not allowed to be fed...
with a particle of food that had been kept in the father's dish, or cooked at his fire; and the little boy, after being weaned, was fed with his father's food, and, as soon as he was able, sat down to meals with his father, while his mother was not only obliged to take hers in an outhouse, but was interdicted from tasting the food which he ate. In addition, husbands could dismiss their wives on any occasion. Thus, Ellis concludes that, even though the tabu system contributed to “the bondage and oppression of the natives in general,...the females in particular” felt all the “humiliating and degrading force” of the tabu system. “The king, sacred chiefs, and priests appear to have been the only persons to whom its application was easy.”

The common people had to prostrate themselves with their faces touching the ground when the “sacred” chiefs walked out. They were on no occasion to touch the chiefs, enter their house without permission, or allow their shadow to fall upon them. The restrictions of different tabus affected every period of their lives. All land was owned by the king because the supreme hereditary authority was the monarch. The land was then divided among the king’s favorite chiefs and warriors. The common people were transferred with the land from one chief to another. First-fruits and rent were given to the chiefs by the common people. They also supported the priests. Each chief paid taxes in produce to the king. In addition, two days out of seven were required of the common people to labor for their landlord. The common people also had to provide sacrifices for the temples whenever ordered. Any item they grew or owned could be seized at any time by a chief for the chief’s own use. Thus, the common people were not encouraged to be industrious. For instance, Chief(ess) Nahienaena on a tour later explained to the listening people:

I call upon you to take notice of the great difference between the mild spirit of the Christian religion and the cruel requisitions of our ancient system. Anciently, if I had made you a visit, I should have commanded you to bring heavy stones and build a temple, to go to the mountains for timber, to thatch the building with care, to bring in offerings of every kind; and after all this toil, then what should I have required? That some of your number should be slain, and your immolated bodies placed upon the altars. Now I simply exhort you to seek your own present and eternal salvation.

Disobedient or uncooperative people or captives could easily become a human sacrifice to a god or bait for sharks. For example, after one victorious battle more than eighty people were sacrificed to the god Kuahiro at the demand of the priest!

Bothersome infants were burned alive or strangled. Observers estimate about two thirds of the children were killed. Parents might consider children “a burden” and not want “to cultivate a little more ground, or undertake the small additional labour necessary to the support of their offspring during the helpless periods of infancy and childhood, in some cases, when the child has been sickly, and the parents have grown tired of nursing and attending it.” Infanticide, wars, and disease were depopulating the island (the Hawaiian population was at 400,000 in 1773, but 140,000 in 1823). Within a forty-year period three quarters of the people died. More baby girls were killed than baby boys.

While the missionaries left in October 1819 from Boston, by November 1819, five months before their arrival, national idolatry had been forbidden in Hawaii. A revolution had occurred. The laws of the tabu were ended. Priests no longer existed as a distinct body. How did this momentous event come about?

When King Kamehameha (Kamehameha I) died, he left the government of the Hawaiian Islands to his eldest son Liholiho (22–25 years old). Almost the first public act of the new king was the abolition of idolatry and tabu. Most historians give primary credit to Queen Kaahumanu (co-ruler, “prime minister” favorite wife of Kamehameha I) and to the ruling Chief(ess) Kekaulani (mother of the king), who together advised the new king to break the tabu and end the despotic power of the priests. However, the women needed the affirmation and courage of Liholiho, who desired to improve the condition of his wives and women in general. Their joint desires were encouraged by the high priest Hewahewa (Hevaheva) declaring, “There is only one Great God in the heavens.” He assured them no evil consequences would follow the ending of the worship of the gods. A number of the principal chiefs, including Karaimoku, agreed to be supportive. One priest (Kapihe) may even have prophesied that:

- the ancient kapu (tabu) will be abolished,
- the heiau (temples) and altars will fall,
- the islands will be united,
- the heavens will descend and the earth ascend.

Individual Christians, such as Capt. Vancouver from Great Britain (1792–94), and the positive example set by the abolition of idolatry in Tahiti may have sowed a positive influence toward a religion without idol worship.

After making this decision, King Liholiho hosted a feast to which many chiefs of the different islands were invited. In traditional format, the men sat in one place, the women in another: “When all were about to begin their meal, the king ordered his attendants to carry” some prohibited food to the place where females were assembled. “He then went, and sitting down, with them, began to eat and directed them to do the same” to show that they would not be killed by the gods if they ate together. A shout of surprise burst from the multitude around: “The tabu is broken, the tabu is broken!” Several other chiefs followed his example. The men and women were eating together and eating the same food! “This public violation...manifested the king's intention to destroy the whole system.” Shortly after, the high priest Hewaheva voluntarily resigned his office. The king declared there would no longer be any priests or any worship to the gods. Like Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar before him, according to missionary Ellis: “Little did the pagan chief (Liholiholo) imagine,” that he was “on his way to removing the most formidable barrier that existed to the introduction of a religion which should finally triumph over every system of idolatry in the world”—Christianity. Idols were
burned, buried, thrown down, hidden away in caves and cast into the ocean throughout the islands.

About a decade later when Ellis traveled to remote Hawaiian villages he found many villagers like those in Kapauku who consequently said they now had “no god; formerly they had many, but now they had cast them all away.” They were joyful the tabu was abolished because it “occasioned much labour and inconvenience, and drained off the best of their property...they had nothing to provide for the great sacrifices, and were under no fear of punishment for breaking tabu; that now, one fire cooked their food, and men and women ate together the same kind of provisions.” They could now dwell together in one house.24

The Scene in Hawaii: Post-Christian Missionary Perspective

The abolition of idolatry left the people without the tabu bondage but with no religion. They were like a house whose demon has been removed, but God’s Spirit had not yet come to fill it up. Between 1823 and 1825 Queen Kaahumanu, Chief(ess) Keopuolani, King Liholiho, Queen Kamehamaru, and Chief(ess) Kapiolani had all converted to Christianity.25 In 1825 Ellis could write that “almost every chief of rank and influence in the Sandwich Islands is favourably disposed towards the instruction of the natives and the promulgation of the gospel.”26 Many chiefs and chief(esses) led significant lives for Christ. Queen Kaahumanu, Chief(ess) Keopuolani, and Chief(ess) Kapiolani are extolled again and again for their advancement of God’s reign in the political and spiritual arenas. Even though women had been the most oppressed by the tabu system, Hawaiian females of nobility could have political rank and authority and privileges. But these privileged women (and also men) who appeared to have the most to lose in ending the tabu system were the ones to abolish it. By repudiating the tabu system, they were repudiating their own divine rank.27

For instance, Queen Kaahumanu, King Liholiho’s favorite wife, would be borne to feasts by chiefs on a litter spread with feather cloaks and cushions, fragrant with fine perfumes. The king treated her like a goddess. She was considered the most beautiful woman in Hawaii. Historian Samuel Kamakau describes her as

six feet tall, straight and well-formed....Her arms were like the inside of a banana stalk, her fingers tapering, her palms pliable like kukunene grass, graceful in repose, her cheeks long in shape and pink as the bud of a banana stem; her eyes like those of a dove or the moho bird; her nose narrow and straight, in admirable proportion to her cheeks; her arched eyebrows shaped to the breadth of her forehead; her hair dark, wavy, and fine, her skin very light. Of Kamehameha’s two possessions, his wife and his kingdom, she was the more beautiful.28

Chief(ess) Keopuolani was the only remaining high tabu chief(ess). Even King Liholiho had to defer in her presence. She and her children “were looked upon by the people as gods with powers like fire, heat, light.”29 Chief(ess) Kapiolani also had royal sacred rank. Unlike other women, royal or otherwise, she could enter the sacred temple of Haleo Pap and eat from the dedicated foods. Being a god, she would not associate with the common people. No one could stare at her. Nevertheless, along with the men, these women used their rank to advance the cause of Christianity not only by giving the Christian missionaries many open opportunities to preach and teach, but also by themselves preaching and teaching the Word throughout the islands.30

Chief(ess) Keopuolani, mother of King Liholiho, was the first to welcome the missionaries and the first to teach her children letters. She, the highest tabu chief(ess), became the first native Hawaiian to be converted and baptized. Afterward Queen Kaahumanu and others became believers. Kamakau explains that “with Keopuolanis acceptance of the Christian faith and way of life, the chiefs in Lahaina immediately left off drinking and gathered about Ta’u’a and Ka’aumoku to hear the new teaching. Great numbers became true worshipers of the Lord and many took up reading and writing.”31 Keopuolani also became the first chief(ess) to become monogamous, taking only Ulumehaheihe as her husband. When she was dying in 1823, she would not allow any pagan wailing or human sacrifice in her honor. Indeed, she was a courageous woman who disregarded her traditions in order to advance Christianity and promote equality.

Queen Elizabeth Kaahumanus’ evangelistic zeal impacted the political arena. Under her influence, reinforced later by Chief(ess) Kinau, beginning in 1824 the Ten Commandments became the basis of government and in the two following decades Christianity became the governmental religion in Hawaii.32 Kaahumanu not only attended to the affairs of the government, she made it her mission to visit every island and every village of each island, spreading the good news of Jesus and promoting education. She said, “We,
chiefs and rulers of these islands, set up in times past altars to sin, but these have been cast aside and we now have salvation from God.” She preached to chiefs and commoners:

We are extending to you the blessed word of salvation which God has given us. You must strive hard to acquire righteousness that you may obtain salvation both in this world and in the world of God to come.

My heart yearns for you in hope that we may all be able to go to the presence of God our Father. Let us all trust in Jesus that we may be saved by God. My heart has accepted the word of the God from above. My heart is now reaching out to you because I feel for you and am devoted to you.”

Historian Kamakau concluded that the above speech demonstrates “the thoughts of a Christian devoted to her ruler and to her people in her desire to improve the condition of the government by taking the word of God as a foundation upon which to build a greater nation.” She is “the famous queen who established God’s Kingdom on Hawaii and who converted chiefs and commoners to the worship of the one God and punished severely those who worshiped other gods.” She believed that it was through adherence to Bible teaching that the government would be lasting. She was “the cable that held the ship of state.” Her grandmother Ha’alo’u once prophesied of her: “You will be a ruler some day, and all your relatives will bow in your presence” and indeed this came true.

Her Christian commitment changed her character and brought justice to her rule. For example, before she became a Christian, she despised the poor. After she became a Christian, she despised the poor. She became a Christian, she despised the poor. She despised the poor. She despised the poor. She despised the poor.

Another powerful Christian female ruler was Chief(ess) Kapiolani of Kaawaloa, who has been described as “the most thoroughly read in her Bible of any chief” and “the most zealous advocate of any of the chiefs for the spread of the gospel” the Hawaiian Islands have ever had: “Her life was a continual evidence of the elevating and purifying effects of the Gospel.”

She was the first chief(ess) to descend to the crater of volcano Pele. No gods were as much dreaded as the deities which supposedly presided over volcanoes, Pele being the principal goddess. These gods never “journeyed on errands of mercy.” They were appeased by offerings or, if not appeased, they executed destructive and sudden vengeance. The Hawaiians said: “Great indeed is the number of men slain by them!” Though in 1819 the people were emancipated from the tabus of the national idols, many of the people had not renounced all idolatry, especially those villagers who lived near the destructive effects of the volcanoes: its earthquakes, fire, burning lava, thunder, lightening, hurling...
of red-hot boulders. Ellis reminds us that those who live near volcanoes while resting at night would be daily reminded of Pele, "occasionally startled from their midnight slumbers by the undulating earthquake." Many remained in constant dread of Pele’s displeasure and would do anything to try to appease her. The goddess Pele presided over the volcano of Kilauea (the largest active crater in the world which is still erupting today!).

The Crater of Kilauea in the 1800s was "an immense yawning gulf" about two miles in length, a mile in width, eight miles in circumference, and 800–1,100 feet deep. The bottom was covered with lava, "sulphureous blue, or glowing with mineral red" with a "glare of dazzling light on the indented sides of the insulated craters, whose roaring mouths, amid rising flames, and eddying streams of fire, shot up, at frequent intervals, with very loud detonations, spherical masses of fusing lava, or bright ignited stones." Any sudden detached rock could precipitate someone "amid the horrid crash of falling rocks, into the burning lake." Plucking the sacred ohelo berries, digging up the sand, and throwing stones into the crater were clearly offensive to the goddess.

When Ellis and other missionaries disregarded all these prohibitions, a priestess of Pele, arrayed in prophetic robes, having the edges of her garments burnt with fire, followed by thousands of people, came to Lahaina in Maui to warn the chiefs that if these foreigners were not banished from the islands, Pele would "take vengeance, by inundating the country with lava, and destroying the people." The missionaries there did not interfere but wisely "relied entirely on the enlightened judgment and integrity of the chiefs" for a response. The crowds waited for an answer. To the astonishment of the chiefs and the priestess too, Queen Kaahumanu ordered that all the paraphernalia of the priestess’ office be thrown into the fire and "told her the message she had delivered was a falsehood, and directed her to return home, cultivate the ground for her subsistence, and discontinue her deceiving the people." The priestess soon after left the island and did not afterward trouble them with threats from the goddess.

Shortly afterward (just before Christmas 1824), Chief(ess) Kapiolani decided she would end worship of the goddess Pele. Even though discouraged by many, majestic in stature and spirit (six feet tall and about 250 pounds in weight), she journeyed about 100–150 miles (mostly on foot) over lava beds to the very brink of the lake of molten lava of Kilauea. Some of the devotees of the goddess Pele met her and assured her that though foreigners might go near the volcano yet "Pele would allow no Hawaiian to intrude." But she replied, "There is but one great God; He will keep me from harm."

A priestess then threatened her with the penalty of being sinned against by sin. As in the early church, the Holy Spirit transforms the stratification between male and female, old and young, rich and poor. Courageous men working alongside valorous women can use their authority to advance God’s reign in every area of life, challenging false gods and their repressive traditions. Now we need to ask: Do we follow up on all God begins? Do we implement fully God’s social revolutions?

Notes


5. Ibid., 281–83; Brain, Transformation, 43; James Jackson Jarves, History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands, 2d ed. (Boston: James Munroe, 1844), 52, 56–57. According to tradition, tabu began as a means to allow sexual immorality when Wakea wanted to commit incest with his daughter unobserved by his wife Papa. Sheldon Dibble, A History of the Sandwich Islands (Honolulu: Thrum, 1909), 12–13, 80–81, 122.


7. Ellis, Polynesian, 284.

8. Ibid., 315.

9. Ibid., 284, 222–23.


11. Ellis, Polynesian, 115, 264, 283–84, 299–304, 309; S. C. Bartlett, Historical Sketch of the Missions of the American Board in the Sandwich
“Prosperity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.” Psalm 22:30–31

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