



A holiness movement, shaped *by* mission: encountering God in Oceania

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Reflecting on the author's experience of Christianity in Oceania, this article draws attention to a classic nineteenth-century Methodist text written in the founding years of the Christian mission in Oceania. Letters on Entire Sanctification was written by John Hunt, a remarkable young missionary, published after his early death in Fiji, and can claim to be the first substantial work of Christian theology written in Oceania. Understanding Hunt's writings in their context helps to define the relationship between holiness and mission, and refocus the Methodist movement as a 'holiness movement, shaped by mission'.

HOLINESS • CHRISTIAN PERFECTION • MISSION • OCEANIA • JOHN HUNT • FIGI • SANCTIFICATION

Introduction

As a minister, a Christian, a human being and theologian I have been shaped by the experience of living, learning, teaching and praying in Oceania. In January 1979 I arrived in Tonga as a probationer minister and mission partner. During my three years as a lecturer at Sia'atoutai Theological College I was married, ordained and became a father – three experiences that were enriched by that cultural setting. Of course I did not (could not) cease to be English and European, but I did begin to appreciate how different the world, life, the Bible and Christian faith can look and feel within different cultures. In recent years I have been privileged to return to Oceania a number of times, visiting Fiji and Samoa as well as Tonga, and I have also come to appreciate the extra-ordinary courage and self-sacrifice of the early missionaries within the islands. A recent sabbatical visit to Oceania involved teaching and preaching, listening and reflecting. I encountered island churches in their changing cultures, developing their mission in a postcolonial setting. But these same churches still had enormous pride in the missionaries who helped to found them. Their spirituality was still an inspiration for present holiness.

In this paper I focus on one nineteenth-century missionary, who came from my own home area of the East Midlands. I offer a reading of the classic nineteenth-century Methodist text, *Letters on Entire Sanctification*,¹ written by John Hunt and published after his early death in Fiji. This book has some claim to be the first substantial work of Christian theology written within the islands of Oceania and for that reason alone deserves to be better remembered. For our own day, Hunt will help us see that engaging in mission is a transformative process that shapes us in the likeness of Christ.

The tiny island of Viwa lies just off the coast of Viti Levu in the Fiji archipelago. I visited it in a small boat, with a Fijian theological student as my guide. We took with us *kava* root (the ceremonial drink of the Pacific) to present to the chief and show our respect. Viwa is largely surrounded by mangrove swamp; it has a landing place for small boats, a cluster of houses and, perched on its only hill, a Methodist church. This speck of green on the vast blue ocean is holy ground for Fijian Methodists, for here, in the 1840s, was the headquarters of their infant church. Here a printing press produced the first Fijian Bibles, and a training institute for indigenous missionaries made it a pioneering centre for theological education. But, most of all, the holiness of Viwa is located in the memory of John Hunt, a remarkable young missionary who took Wesley's injunction to 'spend and be spent' with sacrificial seriousness. Hunt (together with the

Tongan missionary Soeli Pulu) is buried behind the church that was erected in his memory, and his grave has been a place of pilgrimage since his death in 1848. The Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma has plans for a retreat centre to be built around the spot where Hunt, rising in the early hours, would stand and pray for the cannibalistic chief on the neighbouring island of Bau. To pray where Hunt prayed is a step on the way – so Fijian Methodists believe – to being imbued with Hunt’s holiness.

Holiness is not an alien concept in the cultures of Oceania. *Tapu* (from which we derive the English word ‘taboo’) conveys something both holy and forbidden. In Tonga, for example, a church is a *fale tapu* (a holy house) and therefore there is a strong sense of what is and is not appropriate within it. So although the missionaries who brought the Christian gospel to the islands during the nineteenth century had a profound effect in reshaping Oceanic culture, they could not help but be shaped in turn by their experience of living in the islands. Sharing in God’s mission is, I want to argue, a key element in shaping us into the likeness of the holy God of Jesus Christ.

Who was John Hunt?²

It is easy to see why the story of John Hunt was so appealing to the early Victorian Methodist public.³ Born in 1812 to poor parents, he grew up around Balderton, a village on the border of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. In fact, my home town of Newark on Trent has a school named after him. Leaving school at ten he became a farm labourer, hired by the year and with neither security nor prospects. At 16 he experienced a dramatic conversion in the village Wesleyan chapel at Swinderby, an event that catapulted him into a voyage of self-discovery. A sympathetic employer lent him John Mason’s *A Treatise on Self-Knowledge*, the book (apart from the Bible and the works of Wesley) that came to have most influence on him. Mason had condensed into one volume insights on Christian piety from the Catholic and Puritan traditions, given a new perspective through forms of reasoning based on the logical arguments of the Enlightenment. Hunt’s late adolescence saw him continuing his journey of self-improvement, attending night classes and gaining recognition as a local preacher. He developed immense physical strength as well as spiritual maturity and intellectual confidence.

In 1836 Hunt was accepted as a candidate for the Wesleyan ministry and admitted to the newly opened Theological Institute at Hoxton, in East London.

A seminary for preachers was a hugely controversial development for Methodists and there were fears (which do not seem to have disappeared over the last 200 years!) that the piety and enthusiasm of the young students would be dampened by the rigours of academic study. In fact, spiritual formation (as we now call it) was a conspicuous feature of life at Hoxton, with students witnessing to a fuller salvation and spurring each other on towards entire sanctification. The curriculum combined the traditional elements of ministerial training (biblical languages and exegesis, doctrine, etc.) with a catch-up general education, including English language, science and philosophy. John Hannah, the first theology tutor at Hoxton (to whom *Letters on Entire Sanctification* were dedicated), has left us a picture of the kind of theology that Hunt would have absorbed.⁴ There was a strong concern for proof, for the defence of Christian belief and the establishment of Methodist teaching. Its chief theological textbook was Richard Watson's *Institutes*,⁵ which seeks first to prove the reliability of scriptural revelation and then lays out a set of theological doctrines that can (he believed) be proved from Scripture and experience.

While many students spent only a year at Hoxton, Hunt returned for a second year and then began a third. He was clearly a rewarding student to teach. After two-and-half-years' college training he was married (to his childhood sweetheart, Hannah Summers), ordained by the laying on of hands (another recent development for Wesleyans) and stationed to the Methodist mission in Fiji. He would never see England again, dying on Viwa in October 1848, at the age of 36. In his ten years as a missionary Hunt became leader of a small and struggling church, the founder of schools and training institutions, a Bible translator and author. Fiji at that time was riven with violent tribal warfare, often accompanied by cannibalism. It was by no means clear that the mission would survive, let alone prosper. Regular (and often lurid) reports were sent back to England and published in *Missionary Notices* and *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*. Today the Victorian heroic image of the missionaries to the heathen South Sea islanders has long since given way to the (equally one-sided) picture of culturally insensitive bearers of the 'fatal impact' of European domination.⁶ Somewhere between these two extremes lies an appropriate but critical admiration for the sacrificial idealism and willingness to learn that characterised most of these men and women.⁷ More often than not, the early missionaries helped to forge a lasting and productive relationship between local culture and Christian commitment.

The context of the *Letters on Entire Sanctification*

Hunt's *Letters on Entire Sanctification* were written to fellow missionary James Calvert, stationed in another part of Fiji. Although Hunt often protests dissatisfaction with his own writing, it is quite clear that future publication was intended from the start. In a 'review of the year' Hunt talks about his three priorities of evangelism ('converting Fijians'), translation of the Bible into Fijian and promoting holiness in England 'with my pen'.⁸ Writing had to be fitted in the little time left from Bible translation, teaching, preaching, administration – and the demanding business of staying alive in such an environment. But Hunt believed that he was fulfilling a necessary mission for the Church in Britain, even while he was building up a new Church in Fiji. Mission on the one side of the world contributed to the holiness of the Church on the other. It was Calvert who eventually edited the letters for publication after Hunt's death. They went through several editions, their popularity owing much to the saintly reputation of their author. But for all their initial popularity, Hunt's letters do not feature in the major works on Christian perfection produced by British Methodists in the early and mid-twentieth century.⁹ These tended to look directly back to Wesley and locate his doctrine of perfection within the broad stream of Catholic spirituality.

Mission is the context for Hunt's writing, even if the direct references to his situation in Fiji are sparse. It was a situation of immense challenge, some trauma and considerable personal growth. Writing to his former college principal in 1841, Hunt sums up his first two years in Fiji: learning a new language and culture (he claims to have preached extempore in Fijian within five months), adjusting to marriage and family life (including the death of their first child), witnessing cannibalism at close proximity and enduring threats to his own safety, taking responsibility for a training institution for indigenous missionaries. He writes, too, of spiritual challenge and blessing, but ends on a note of extreme self-deprecation:

Alas for me I fear my unfaithfulness has made it impossible that I should ever know so much of God as you know; even if I live as many years and from this time be faithful, I never think of you but I am ashamed of myself.¹⁰

So the author of the *Letters on Entire Sanctification* is someone who struggles with his own sense of unworthiness even though he can assert that he has at least 'the lowest degree of perfection'.

The style of the *Letters* is plain and straightforward. As a writer Hunt comes across as intelligent, but not sophisticated, a skilled but inelegant communicator. For Hunt, you sense, elaborate language would be as useless and dangerous as ostentatious dress.

We might see the letters as exercises in what has been called 'scriptural reasoning'; the range of references is remarkable, with Hunt darting backwards and forwards through the Bible to seek out examples to illustrate his point or (more often) exegetical evidence to build up the argument he is making. He has a clear sense of the hermeneutic that guides him:

The Book of Revelation [ie Scripture] is to the theologian what the book of nature is to the philosopher.

... The operations of the Spirit of God on the hearts and minds of believers, and the fruits of these operations, as seen in their tempers and conduct, he regards as the best helps to a right understanding of those parts of Scripture which describe inward and outward holiness. The testimony of one man, who is in every respect competent to give testimony, is to these doctrines what a well-conducted experiment is in philosophy. If we can produce hundreds of such cases, then the evidence is in proportion stronger, and confirms us in the fact, that we have not mistaken the meaning of Scripture on these important – but, from the nature of the case, difficult – subjects.¹¹

Authentic biblical interpretation, even when it employs the work of linguists and exegetes, is for Hunt evidenced through the inner experience of Christians and the outward fruitfulness of their lives. This practical and experiential hermeneutic is in sharp contrast to the historical-critical method that would soon come to prevail in European biblical studies, but it does have something in common with recent emphases on the role of the interpretative community in establishing meaning.

Entire sanctification defined

What picture of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, emerges from Hunt's reading of Scripture? He had, of course, been trained in the Wesleyan vision of a perfection that can be granted by God before death,¹² one that is

not so much the unalterable perfection of God's self, but rather a perfect orientation in love towards God and others. For Wesley this (admittedly, limited) perfection is taught in Scripture and evidenced in the holy lives and spiritual experience of many genuine Christians. Its roots have been detected in his Puritan and Pietist forebears, in the broad tradition of Catholic spirituality and in the Eastern Fathers.¹³

Hunt's picture of Christian perfection seeks to be faithful to Wesley, but develops a direction of its own. He gives a definition in three parts: 'entire purity of heart', 'maturity of Christian character' and 'practical holiness'.¹⁴ The last of these involves what Hunt terms 'a uniform attention to the claims of God and the duties we owe to ourselves and all men'. This recognition that sanctification/perfection is complex means that it cannot be boiled down to an event, an experience, or a pattern of behaviour. This is helpful because talk of Christian perfection tends to face two dangers. One is an emphasis on personal religious experience that reduces it to subjectivity. The other is an emphasis on behaviour that reduces it to moralism. Hunt is drawn more to the second; at times he so stresses the moral heavy lifting required of mature Christians that we could forget the 'easy yoke' and 'light burden' of Christ's teaching. He was clearly a driven man himself, dreading an idle moment and chastising fellow missionaries for daring to suggest that they were too tired for biblical translation after their other duties. What (just about) saves Hunt from the more unattractive forms of Christian moralism is his keen sense of the ultimate purpose and goal of Christian perfection. It is nothing less than an intimate union with the triune God.

In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, John Wesley stressed the 'in a moment' nature of the process of perfection, though he did talk about the need for further development. While Hunt does not deny that there are key moments of transformation, his emphasis is much more on a process. 'Maturity' is a key word for him and he links entire sanctification to a series of steps in the Christian life. There are, he says, four stages of Christian holiness taught in the New Testament:¹⁵

- 1 Pardon and regeneration (John 1:12–13).
- 2 Destruction of 'the carnal mind' to produce the 'perfect love of God and man' (1 John 4:17–18).
- 3 'Being filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:18–19).
- 4 'An intimate and constant union with the ever-blessed Trinity' (1 John 1:7).

These steps lead from the inward event of saving faith, through a process of sanctification that moves us (in St Paul's words) from 'living according to the flesh' to 'living according to the Spirit'. The third and fourth steps conform us more and more to the likeness of Christ, bringing us into ever closer communion with the Trinity.

Far from being exceptional, Hunt is convinced that entire sanctification should be the expected outcome of the normal Christian life. It comes with the maturing of Christian understanding and love. It is reflected in a life of self-denial; at times Hunt's prescription for Christian duty sounds harsh and austere in the extreme. We can picture him in his traditional Fijian hut, with only the basic necessities of life, casting a critical eye towards those back in England who take pleasure in clothes, food and pastimes. But self-denial is, he tells us, the only true form of self-love. Freeing ourselves from the desires of the world will open up for us the one true desire, which is for full union with God. By bringing us back time after time to the ultimate goal of the Christian life, Hunt is able to move from a dour sense of duty to a kind of rugged joy.

Although Hunt's prose is, for the most part, dogged rather than lofty, there are rare rhapsodic passages that remind us of the great tradition of Christian mysticism and even of the best hymns of Charles Wesley:

In our God we find all we need, and all we need at all times ... He who fills eternity with His being is ours. 'if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.' (Rom viii.17) What have we found in finding God! The more we are like God, the more we delight in Him, in all these respects; and therefore, that degree of religion which makes us like Him brings to a happy maturity this modification of Christian love. Then shall we delight ourselves in the Lord, and He will give us the desire of our hearts, and we shall every moment say, what we now always desire to say, 'Whom have I in heaven but Thee?'¹⁶

There is a hint, then, of a poetic imagination. Hunt read and wrote poetry in both Fijian and English. His surviving notes in the MMS archive include a poem to his wife on her thirty-third birthday and a very long (79 stanzas!) narrative poem on the death by drowning of Mrs Cross¹⁷ on a missionary journey in Tonga. As a preacher and translator, Hunt had to master a language that is much more idiomatic than abstract. He had constantly to find culturally meaningful ways to express his faith.

There are weaknesses, of course. Hunt had no idea that he was standing in a long line of Christian spirituality that embraces Catholic and Orthodox as well as Protestant understandings of holiness. In a sermon outline sent to a friend he gives a potted version of Church history that (presumably) came from his theological training.¹⁸ It is a story of Papist corruption and error beginning with Origen's 'wild' interpretations of Scripture and is only lightened by a line of faithful dissent from the likes of Waldo, Wycliffe and Huss. It is fair to say that Hunt – like Wesley – shared the anti-Catholic sentiments of his Protestant culture. Wesley, though, with his greater historical sense, was more aware of the long succession of the teaching and practice of Christian perfection, a succession reflected in the eclectic collection of texts in his *Christian Library*. In the *Letters* Hunt lumps 'Papists' with Muslims and heathens and regards Catholicism as a dangerous parody of true Christianity. For him, the Catholic mission in Fiji was the work of darkness masquerading as the work of light.

Readers might be surprised to find relatively few direct references to his life in Fiji in the *Letters on Entire Sanctification*. He does mention cannibalism, but also the extraordinary hospitality of which Fijian society was capable. One or two traditional customs have a mention, but that is all. One recent commentator has even suggested that by writing to Calvert in this way Hunt was, as it were, taking time out from the rigours of missionary work.¹⁹ I would take a different view and argue that Hunt's account of entire sanctification relates to his context in a number of different and interlocking ways. He arrived in Fiji already convinced of the doctrine of entire sanctification, but his commitment to it, his understanding of it and (perhaps most importantly) his living it out were shaped by the context and demands of mission.

First, entire sanctification is essential to the enterprise of mission. Only the work of God in freeing us from sinful desire and filling us with godly love can make us fit for and effective in the work of Christian mission. Hunt is clear that without the blessing of the Holy Spirit he would not have the motivation to journey to Fiji, neither would he have the character and stamina to survive and build up the Church. Holiness, in this sense, has formed him for mission, and holiness is necessary for the desperately needed promotion of Christian mission. So although holiness has as its ultimate goal our unity with the triune God, it proximately serves God's purpose of reaching out to the nations.

Second, entire sanctification enables him to be formed *by* mission. One of the most interesting parts of the *Letters* is the section on Christian patriotism and

our duty to others. Here, Hunt gives us an inspiring vision of what it means to be part of one worldwide human family:

Have we not one Father, one Governor, Sustainer, Benefactor, one saviour, who has bought us all with a price, and has taught us how we ought to value ourselves and one another? The things that make us equal are great; the things which make us different are trifles. We are all one family, though scattered to different parts of the world, Our world itself is only large when we think of it exclusively; it is but a speck in comparison of the universe. To the all seeing eye of God we constitute but one family. Our little differences of colour, national customs, forms of government, different degrees of secular civilisation, etc, are nothing to him. He pities us all and those most who need it most. We are to imitate him, and feel that the wretchedness of the world is a family wretchedness; that we are members of the very family a part of which is utterly destitute of the blessings we enjoy. A mature Christian embraces every man in the world as a brother.²⁰

This is a remarkable quotation, combining the influence of a modern scientific outlook ('our world ... is but a speck') with a willingness to see his own culture and civilisation as but one way of being human. Even if sentiments like these had arisen in Hunt's native East Midlands (and it is doubtful that they would) they carry a deeper credibility when expressed in the context of Hunt's Fijian experience. The comment on culture is consistent with Hunt's immersion in Fijian life and society and his use of idiomatic, rather than literal, translation in his work on the Fijian Bible. The *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Hunt notes his interest in Fijian culture to the point of writing an article on traditional Fijian poetry.²¹ It seems likely that both Hunt's growing experience of sanctification and his expanding vision of how that sanctification affects Christian outlook and behaviour were moulded by his mission context.

Third, Hunt sees entire sanctification as a teaching to be passed on and a practice to share. Just as he has been formed in faith and holiness through his succession of communities, from the village chapel in Swinderby, through the seminary at Hoxton, to the churches and settlements of Fiji, so he, in turn, looks to develop communities in which new Christians can be formed and become holy. For the indigenous Fijian students he was training in mission he provided (at 6.00 am!) regular lectures on Christian doctrine and holiness, based on a

contextual reworking of his lecture notes from Hoxton. Nothing shapes ideas better than having to teach others, and Hunt's mature understanding of sanctification must have involved putting into new language and idioms ideas that came from a very different context. In a sermon on Christian perfection,²² Hunt (commenting on Hebrews 6) describes his text as 'a happy mixture of doctrinal and practical theology' – what Charles Wesley called 'Knowledge and vital piety'.²³

Fourth, the evidence of Hunt's own life and ministry as holiness in action deepened and gave credibility to the picture of sanctification that he presented. That he spent long night hours in prayer for his enemies among Fiji's chiefs demonstrates both the spirituality he brought to Fiji and the spirituality that was formed in him while he was there. The chief for whom he prayed most, Cacobau (pronounced Thakombau) of Bau, came to see his body before it was buried and, some while later, accepted Christian baptism.

Conclusion

Why look back to a nineteenth-century missionary and his writing? Because both the descendants of Hunt's sending Church, and the descendants of the Church he helped to found, can still gain from a critical reflection on his story and his writing. In particular, he will help us all to appreciate the following.

First, as we seek to discern and to be equipped for the mission that God would have us share in the present, our formation in sanctification is an essential part of the process. To put it theologically, if we are to share the work of God we should be prepared to share in the nature of God. Part of my recent sabbatical involved staying in a theological college where students rise at 5.00 am for prayer each day. I was challenged by the prioritising of spiritual formation.

But, second, the converse is also true. One of the most effective ways to share in the nature and life of God – and that is what Christian perfection finally aims at – is to share in the work of God as God directs us in our situation. When that mission involves crossing cultural boundaries – as it did for Hunt, and has for me – we are more likely to depend on God rather than ourselves.

And, third, there is one key test: our love of God and of our neighbour in every situation and in all details. Hunt's life in Fiji gave him a new appreciation of who his neighbour was and what it meant to love his neighbour. How do we cultivate situations in which our love of neighbour expands and becomes more practised?

In conclusion, Methodism is 'a holiness movement shaped by mission'. Hunt reminds us that if Methodism is a movement, it is primarily a movement for holiness. While discipleship may describe one aspect of the means, holiness describes the end – the *telos* – of the Christian life, and therefore the aim of Methodism. And Hunt also (by example as much as by words) reminds us that the way of holiness lies through sharing in the self-giving mission of the triune God.

Notes

1. Hunt 1849.
2. Those wanting a more detailed account of Hunt's life will find it in the recent biography by Thornley (2000). This is a critical work, printed in English and Fijian in the same volume, though it has only a little on Hunt's writing. There is more on the *Letters* in Birtwhistle 1954. Stringer Rowe's (1860) biography is useful for its many direct quotes from Hunt's letters, while Nettleton (1902) is more in the genre of hagiography. Many of Hunt's papers can be accessed through the microfiches of the MMS archive at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
3. As well as the extravagant obituary printed in *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, James Calvert's account of Hunt's final illness was printed as a pamphlet and a full-scale biography soon followed: Rowe 1860.
4. Hannah 1836.
5. Watson 1823.
6. Moorehead 1990.
7. The classic account of Christian missions at this period is in Garrett 1982.
8. Rowe 1860, p. 191.
9. These include: Flew 1934, Sangster 1943, Chadwick 1936.
10. Letter of John Hunt to the Revd Joseph Entwisle, June–August 1841.
11. Hunt 1859, p. 2.
12. John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection can be found in a number of his sermons, eg, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-76-on-perfection/>, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-40-christian-perfection/> (accessed 19/05/16), and his defence of the doctrine in Wesley 1952.
13. A helpful recent exposition and critique of Wesley's teaching on perfection is in Noble 2013.
14. Hunt 1859, p. 7.
15. Hunt 1859, pp. 47f.
16. Hunt 1859, p. 106.
17. Those familiar with Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland* will notice a similarity in subject matter and theological reflection, but not (unfortunately) in poetic genius.

18. Sermon outlines presented to Richard Lyth, MMS archives, School of Oriental and African Studies.
19. Glen O'Brian, 'Holiness in the South Pacific', Wesleyan Convention, Lake Taupo, New Zealand, June 2006.
20. Hunt 1859, p.115.
21. Arnold and Samson 2004.
22. Sermon outlines presented to Richard Lyth, MMS archives, School of Oriental and African Studies.
23. Unite the pair so long disjoined,
Knowledge and vital piety:
Learning and holiness combined,
And truth and love, let all men see
In those whom up to thee we give,
Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.
(A Charles Wesley hymn for children.)

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