

Mormon Intruders in Tonga: The Passport Act of 1922

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On 29 June 1922 the Legislative Assembly in the island kingdom of Tonga enacted a law that prohibited all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from entering that country.¹ This event occurred after considerable discussion and debate among governmental officials in Tonga, Fiji, Great Britain, and the United States. This study reviews the Latter-day Saint exclusion issue as it relates to the historical development of Christianity in Tonga, including sectarian relationships and government involvement in ecclesiastical affairs, the official attitude of the U.S. government regarding the Latter-day Saints and polygamy, and the United Kingdom's official actions toward the Latter-day Saints.

A Prevailing Intolerance

LDS Church history provides many examples of the relationship of governments to a minority religious organization, examples that have invariably caused crisis situations in the Mormon movement.² The most serious of these crises occurred between 1882, when the first Edmunds Act outlawing polygamy was passed, and the outbreak of World War I. As before, the church during this period was the recipient of much abuse. Even LDS Church leaders' banning of polygamy did little at first to reduce public hostility. The effects of the polygamy problem went beyond the bounds of the United States and extended into Great Britain³ and her protectorates. Although the attitude of most Americans toward the Latter-day Saints and their beliefs mellowed after the outbreak of World War I, intolerance prevailed elsewhere. At the conclusion of World War I, for example, the LDS Church had considerable difficulty obtaining permission from the British Foreign and Home Offices for its missionaries to enter Great Britain. Through pressure from the U.S. State Department, the problem was finally resolved in England in June 1920,⁴ but it remained a sensitive issue in Australia, New Zealand, and Tonga.

To understand the Tongan government's position against the Mormons, it is necessary to know the background of Tonga's religious history. "The Church history of Tonga," wrote Charles W. Forman, "has been the most turbulent of all the Pacific Islands."⁵ Yet Tonga has made greater attempts to preserve unity than any other island territory. Perhaps it was the desire to preserve unity at one time and to restore it at another that moved the government to take action to stop the growing influence of the Latter-day Saints.

The first successful Christian mission to Tonga was under Wesleyan Methodist leadership. After two abortive attempts to gain converts, the first by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1797 and the second by Walter Lawry in 1822, John Thomas and John Hutchison finally succeeded in an effort that began in 1826. By 1829 seven converts had been baptized, and on 7 August 1831⁶ Chief Taufa'ahau of Ha'apai submitted to baptism, taking the Christian name George and becoming a close ally of the missionaries. Tonga was nominally Christianized by the 1840s.⁷

Even before Chief Taufa'ahau was baptized, an important decision had been made concerning missionary jurisdiction in Tonga and other nearby areas. To prevent competition between the LMS, which was operating in the area, and the Wesleyan Missionary Society, representatives of the two groups met in 1830 and arrived at an agreement.⁸ Samoa, they decided, would henceforth be an LMS area, while Tonga and Fiji would be the

responsibility of the Wesleyans. The religious groups that arrived later—first the Roman Catholics and then the Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, and Latter-day Saints—were considered intruders.

Political matters led to Taufa'ahau's becoming the paramount chief, or *Tu'i Kanokupolu*, in 1845, then king of the Vava'u group, and finally, after difficult times that included three wars, the last of which ended in 1852, king of the whole of Tonga. He took the title King George Tupou (posthumously known as Tupou I) and reigned until his death in 1893.

The Christianization of Tonga was a disruptive force from the beginning, affecting virtually all aspects of life. The old sociopolitical structure was based on patterns of power that were undermined by the acceptance of the new religion, leaving chiefs worried and uncertain about the extent of their authority. King George recognized these problems early in his reign; in fact, in 1838, before he became king of Tonga, he issued a legal code designed to solve them. His efforts to clarify and improve Tonga's legal structure continued through several stages, culminating in 1862 with a more extensive and clearly written code. The code contained a clause that emancipated the people, who virtually had been the slaves of the chiefs. It also set up a parliament (the Legislative Assembly) consisting of (1) the cabinet ministers, (2) seven nobles who were elected by their hereditary peers, and (3) seven representatives of the common people. Missionary influence was evident throughout the code: a recently arrived missionary named Shirley W. Baker had been the king's principal adviser while the document was being drafted.

In November 1875 a constitution was promulgated. The result of considerable discussion among the king, leading government officials, and missionaries, particularly Shirley Baker,⁹ it was an important and progressive document. But Article V, which granted complete freedom of religion and religious toleration, became a point of contention and misunderstanding within the dominant Wesleyan Church and also among various denominations and church divisions.

The most painful discord began in January 1885, when ties with the Wesleyan Conference in Sydney were broken and the *Siasi Uesiliana Tau'atina 'o Tonga*, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (Free Church of Tonga), was established.¹⁰ Historian Elizabeth Wood Ellem explains the affair:

The converts of the Wesleyan Mission between 1826 and 1885 were supporters of the Tu'i Kanokupolu (the title that has since become synonymous with sovereign), just as the converts to Catholicism were the supporters of the Tu'i Tonga, rival of the Tu'i Kanokupolu. After the death of the last Tu'i Tonga and the withdrawal of foreign funds from the Wesleyan Mission, the Tu'i Kanokupolu King George Tupou (posthumously known as Tupou I) sought to establish himself as head of the church, just as he had established himself as head of the state. Tupou I's request to the parent church in Australia for a greater degree of independence was acceded to, except in one particular: the parent church would not agree to Tupou selecting and appointing the President of the Conference of the newly independent branch of the Wesleyan Church of Australasia. In 1885, therefore, Tupou broke from the parent church completely, and founded his own church . . . commonly known as the Free Church of Tonga.¹¹

During his later years, George Tupou I came increasingly under the influence of Shirley Baker, who had been appointed prime minister and who had held several other important offices. Before the events of the mid-1880s, Baker had a falling-out with his Wesleyan colleagues in Tonga and Sydney. He argued that Tongan moneys were being sent out of the country, that the king was thus losing control of these moneys, and that the British were planning to use the Wesleyan Church as a means of taking possession of Tonga.¹²

The Reverend Jabez Bunting Watkin (born in Lifuka, Ha'apai), a longtime friend of Baker and a coworker in the Wesleyan Church, became president of the Free Church of Tonga. He held that position until 1924, when at age eighty-seven he was discharged by Queen Salote.¹³ By that time, what had started as the king's church had come under the influence of "chiefs of intermediate rank," most of whom were opposed to the queen. As a result, the royal house had difficulty controlling the church it had founded.¹⁴

The ecclesiastical break in 1885 brought bitter feelings. The king wanted all Tongans to leave the Wesleyan congregation and to show their loyalty to him by joining the new church. But religious convictions were strong, and a small but vocal minority refused to make the move. Persecution finally persuaded the loyal Wesleyans to join the Free Church, but some individuals in high positions remained faithful to the old church. Baker deprived eleven notables of their titles and dismissed them from office.¹⁵

By September 1885 matters had calmed down, but the relative peace was broken when in 1887 a group of escaped prisoners attempted to assassinate Baker. The attempt failed, but the attack was blamed on the Wesleyan Church. J. Egan Moulton, head of the Wesleyan Church, described the results: "After weeks of suffering—a veritable reign of terror, during which churches and colleges were closed—all who remained faithful to the Wesleyan Church in Tonga, Ha'apai, and Vava'u were exiled to Fiji. Ninety noble souls."¹⁶ Basil Thompson recorded that two hundred people were shipped out of the country.¹⁷ Among the exiles was the daughter of the king.

This time Baker had gone too far. On 5 July 1890 the British high commissioner for the western Pacific stepped in and ordered him off the islands. Six days later the new premier granted amnesty for acts of conscience committed by the Fiji exiles and others during the period of struggle.¹⁸

Only a year and ten days after Baker was deported, Latter-day Saint missionaries Brigham Smoot and Alva J. Butler arrived at Tongatapu. They immediately arranged for an interview with the aging Tongan king, George Tupou I, who "gave them permission to preach to the people." His people, King George said, were "free to join whichever church suited them best." However, he quickly changed his mind. On the same day that the Mormons visited the king, representatives of both the Free Church of Tonga and the Wesleyan Church paid the king a special visit and reportedly asked him to "banish the Mormons."¹⁹ Within two weeks an order was issued to deport the two missionaries.

Why the missionaries were allowed to stay in the country for three or four months before the order was rescinded is not clear. It may have been because of the protests of the American vice-consul at Apia, Samoa, who demanded that the LDS missionaries be permitted to proselytize just as the other missionaries had been allowed to do. For the time being this ended the conflict between the Latter-day Saints, the Tongan government, and the two opposing sects. Other LDS missionaries arrived, and an active proselytizing effort ensued. Progress was so slow, however, that the mission was closed six years later, in 1897. There had been only sixteen baptisms.²⁰

Ten years later, in 1907, LDS missionaries returned to Tonga. This second effort proved more fruitful than the first, and soon additional missionaries were assigned to Tonga. In 1916 Willard L. Smith, a missionary serving with his wife, Jenny, in Samoa, was called to preside over the newly organized Tongan Mission. Although missionary numbers in Tonga were not large (only eight to twelve) during Smith's four-year tenure, the mission there saw modest success. By the time of his departure in 1920, 820 Tongans had been baptized into the church.

From the moment Smith began his new assignment in 1916, he began asking LDS Church authorities in Salt Lake City to send more missionaries. His requests were not easily met, however, because the British government refused to issue the necessary visas.²¹ Initially the cause was World War I and the complications it provoked, but when the war ended in November 1918, the British continued to exclude LDS missionaries from Tonga. Senator Reed Smoot, a member of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, protested to the U.S. Department of State about the ban. The State Department forwarded its concurring view to London, and the issue was finally resolved in June 1920, when Great Britain agreed once again to grant visas to LDS missionaries.²² In the meantime, Latter-day Saints destined for Tonga had found it possible to enter that land through Vava'u via American Samoa.²³ When Willard Smith and his wife left Tonga in the spring of 1920, his replacement, M. Vernon Coombs of Canada, because he was a resident of a British Commonwealth country, had no difficulty obtaining a permanent visa.

One of the reasons Smith wanted more missionaries was because of his, and later Coombs's, commitment to education as a means of helping the people. It was also a productive means of proselytizing. The first LDS missionaries in Tonga had organized several elementary schools, and further educational efforts were begun when missionary work recommenced in 1907. By 1920 two schoolhouses had been constructed, but they only partially represented the total educational effort of the church. Each pair of elders taught a school in the village where they were stationed. Coombs considered the schools "the very life of our missionary endeavor," and by the end of 1921, formal government approval for the schools had been obtained.²⁴

Almost concurrently with their educational successes, however, came trouble. Antagonism against the Latter-day Saints flared in the Ha'apai group during September 1921, when the local officials, using the pretext of an influenza epidemic, denied them the right to hold a conference. The decision was clearly an act of religious discrimination: the Wesleyans and the Free Church of Tonga had been allowed to hold meetings even larger than the LDS conference at the very time the latter had been scheduled.²⁵ At the same time, in late 1921, the government rejected an application to lease property²⁶ on which a mission house at Lifuka, Ha'apai, was to be constructed. When Coombs asked Prince Tungi, minister of lands, for an explanation, he was informed that the government was considering a proposal to exclude Latter-day Saints from entering Tonga. Until that matter was resolved, the government would grant no more leases to the LDS Church.²⁷

Unknown to the LDS missionaries, excluding Latter-day Saints from Tonga had first been considered in international circles during the fall of 1919—two years before the missionaries suspected anything—when Laverne Clarke, the wife of an LDS missionary in Tonga, applied for an entry visa.²⁸ When her application reached Tonga, it was rejected by officials who explained to the British consul and agent Islay McOwan that "it is not considered advisable to allow any more members of the Mormon Church to come to Tonga." Moreover, explained Premier Tu'i Vakano, when the seven missionaries already in Tonga left, no replacements would be allowed. Two denominations, he believed, were all that were needed.²⁹

McOwan found the government's proposed action unacceptable. Unless better reasons were forthcoming, McOwan told Tu'i Vakano, he could not defend such a course to the British high commissioner, the official with final authority over passports. Tu'i Vakano confessed that he was not able to bring any specific charge against the Latter-day Saints, but he repeated rumors that LDS missionaries in England were exporting "numbers of young girls to . . . America." Besides, he noted, "other civilized nations" were not favorably inclined toward the Mormons.³⁰

Late in February 1920 the Tongan government repealed its decision about Laverne Clarke, stating that she could now enter Tonga. Her husband's residence in Tonga was the expressed reason for allowing one last Mormon to enter the country. But considerable time passed before Mrs. Clarke's application was formally approved by London,³¹ because First Viscount Alfred Milner, secretary of state for the British colonies, delayed action until the entire Mormon visa question was resolved. The government reached a decision in June 1920, but Milner did not grant Mrs. Clarke's request until August. By then her husband's remaining term in Tonga was so short that she did not join him there.³²

The Exclusion Law of 1922

It seems strange that even though the British government had decided to allow LDS missionaries into the United Kingdom, this decision was not applied to Tonga. Instead, the British Foreign Office instructed the British Passport Control Office in New York not to grant visas to LDS missionaries bound for Tonga. Word of this decision did not reach Tonga until late February 1921, but by then it was obvious to Tu'i Vakano and his cabinet that the British action was ineffective. Determined missionaries were avoiding the New York Passport Control Office and entering Tonga from Canada, Fiji, and American Samoa. To close these gaps, Tongan authorities proposed to handle the problem themselves. Tu'i Vakano requested British permission to pass a law banning LDS missionaries as undesirable immigrants. "They can hardly be looked on as Christians, and therefore religious liberty would not apply to them," he explained.³³ The British government seemed to agree. As Winston Churchill, the colonial secretary, expressed: "After consultation with His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs considers that no objections are likely to be raised by the United States Government to the exclusion of these missionaries from Tonga, on the understanding that the contemplated legislation is to be confined to the exclusion of those who may wish to enter in the future and not to the expulsion of those who already reside in the islands."³⁴

With that encouragement, Tongan leaders acted quickly. On 29 June 1922 the Legislative Assembly enacted legislation prohibiting Latter-day Saints from entering Tonga, imposing a 100 fine, deportation, or both on violators. Latter-day Saints already in Tonga, however, would be allowed to remain there.³⁵ The new law went into effect on 18 July, but fortunately for the LDS mission, another missionary couple, Lawrence Leavitt and his wife, Mary, arrived just before the deadline. They were the last LDS missionaries to enter the country for more than two years.

The exclusion law naturally caused serious problems for the LDS Church. Because church leaders call laymen as full-time "ministers of the gospel" for a relatively short time and keep a cycle of replacements coming, the breaking of that cycle threatened to quickly eliminate the mission. During the two years following the enactment of the law, Coombs saw his mission staff dwindle to a total of five foreign (that is, American and Canadian) missionaries. Had he not called Tongans to act as missionaries, conversions to the church would have ceased. Two American missionaries had died of typhoid fever at Pangai, several others had left because of elephantiasis, one departed because of a hernia, and another left because he was "a complete physical wreck." Still others left because of financial or domestic complications at home.³⁶

The steady decline of the missionary force was a strain on Coombs and the Tongan members. As the elders finished their missions and departed, the schools, which had been conducted at virtually every location where missionaries lived, were consolidated, until by early 1924 only one school remained open in each island group. There were other problems as well. On Tongatapu, Coombs was responsible for nine branches or congregations.

Travel between these units was usually by horseback, or, for Mrs. Coombs, in a horse-drawn carriage. Travel between the Tongan islands was most commonly by small sailboats. However, as word spread of the legal status of the Latter-day Saints, missionaries found it virtually impossible to hire boats and boatmen. Coombs vividly described the growing persecution of the Latter-day Saints: “We have been stoned out of houses, in Ha’apai the natives will absolutely not allow us to ride in their boats. In Vava’u the natives politely requested us to leave their houses, and the natives everywhere have informed us that they are strictly forbidden to converse with a Mormon missionary.”³⁷

The open criticism and public cursing of missionaries and their work were heaviest during the summer of 1923. Discouraged, Coombs complained to LDS Church president Heber J. Grant that only two church members in Ha’apai had faith strong enough to stand any test. Furthermore, Coombs doubted there were more than thirty members with strong faith among the thousand members in the mission.³⁸ This frankness did not serve Coombs’s interests, for in November 1923 Grant suggested the possibility of closing the Tongan mission and bringing everyone home. Before Coombs could reply, other troubles arose and were reported to Salt Lake City.

Among Coombs’s most serious concerns during the early part of 1924 was moral laxity among members. Several incidents of sexual immorality were reported far and wide and greatly hindered the Mormon cause. A severe blow came when a Tongan missionary couple had disagreements and the wife “slept several nights with another young man.”³⁹ Coombs had counted this pair among his select thirty faithful.

The missionaries did not criticize the Tongans individually, but they did believe that certain cultural traits created problems. They found the Tongans “emotional and passionate” and difficult to influence with “cold reason and hard fact.” “They are all good people,” Coombs wrote to the First Presidency, “and take very active parts, observe the tithing law, observe the Word of Wisdom [health law], and contribute liberally to our various functions, but simply cannot leave the opposite sex alone.”⁴⁰

Efforts to Repeal a Discriminatory Law

Why the exclusion law was passed was at first a mystery to LDS Church members and missionaries alike. Through careful probing, Coombs pieced together most of the Legislative Assembly debate several months before he succeeded in acquiring a transcript of the proceedings. According to his informants, the Latter-day Saints were accused of teaching and practicing polygamy, teaching the people to be disobedient and disrespectful to government authorities, claiming to belong to *the* church of Jesus Christ, claiming to be saints, and being rude. As the months passed, the list of accusations grew.⁴¹

The transcript of the debate, which Coombs finally acquired in December 1923, revealed that polygamy was the main issue. But there were others: “Disturbances are caused by this church,” and “Many of their religious doctrines clash with the doctrines of other churches which have been brought to Tonga.”⁴² Coombs never could discover why the polygamy issue was raised in Tonga when the practice, which had been abandoned by the church in 1890, had never been taught in the islands. From discussions with friends in the expatriate community, he tentatively concluded that outside antagonists—that is, non-Tongan ministers of the Wesleyan Church and the Free Church of Tonga—were the source of the problem.

Coombs concluded that there were only three possible approaches to getting the law repealed.⁴³ One, which proved fruitless, was to pressure the British high commissioner to countermand the law, but he did not have

authority to veto Tongan legislation. Another tactic was to persuade the Legislative Assembly that the law was unconstitutional or was based on false information. A third approach, in which Coombs did not have much confidence because he was not aware of the efforts being made in this avenue, was through the U.S. State Department.

The legislative approach was slow and difficult. Paperwork was time consuming, and Coombs was sure he suffered an unfair disadvantage. "To make matters worse," he observed in February 1923, "the native members of the Legislative Assembly are nearly all the local pastors in their respective village, of the Free Church of Tonga and the Wesleyan Church. These Pastor-Legislators know that their cause is lost if they give us an open deal; they close in on us and will sit tight until outside pressure compels them to alter their movements."⁴⁴

Ironically, serious problems were brewing between the four thousand members of the Wesleyan Church and the seventeen thousand who followed the Free Church of Tonga. According to Coombs, these problems arose in late 1922 when the young Queen Salote, at that time in New Zealand, was informed that the Reverend J. B. Watkin, the head of the Free Church of Tonga, had refused to reveal how the annual monetary collection was expended. "Does the Free Church belong to you or me?" the queen asked Watkin.⁴⁵

As early as 3 November 1922 Coombs was aware of the problems brewing between the two factions. He could see no outcome more likely for the two groups, considering their similar interests, than unification. This was especially probable because Queen Salote, the nominal head of the Free Church of Tonga, was greatly influenced by her husband, Prince Uiliami Tungi, a Wesleyan. More important was their united objective of solidifying their joint rule of Tonga. But unification took some time to accomplish. In an effort to influence her people to unite, Queen Salote made a trip to the northern islands. When she left in early December 1923, she instructed Watkin not to hold the annual monetary collection. However, he incurred her wrath by making the collection anyway, and matters became increasingly heated until April 1924, when Queen Salote discharged Watkin from his post.⁴⁶ Serious clashes between Wesleyans and members of the Free Church led to physical violence. According to Coombs, the immediate result for many Tongans was a lack of confidence in those two sects and greater interest in the Mormons.

In the meantime, developments outside Tonga raised no small stir. Unknown to Coombs, considerable attention was being paid to the exclusion law in Washington, D.C., London, Suva, and Apia. Also unknown to Coombs, British consul Islay McOwan was being informed of these developments as they took place outside Tonga. As the complexion of the British position toward the LDS Church changed, McOwan assumed a more friendly attitude toward the Latter-day Saints.

At this point it is helpful to trace the sequence of events relating to the Mormon exclusion issue as they occurred in the international diplomatic sphere after the exclusion law was passed on 29 June 1922.

On 9 August 1922 Quincy F. Roberts, U.S. vice-consul in Apia, Samoa, sent a telegram to Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, informing him of the passage of the discriminatory law in Tonga. Roberts had been informed of these events by John Q. Adams, LDS mission president in Samoa. Hughes forwarded a copy of Roberts's telegram to Senator Reed Smoot, who informed LDS Church president Heber J. Grant of the exclusion law.

Meanwhile, Roberts had acted on the matter without instructions from Washington. On 28 August 1922 he sent letters of protest to the prime minister of Tonga, to British high commissioner Cecil Hunter Rodwell, and to

McOwan in Tonga. He complained of prejudice; reminded the concerned parties of the U.S.-Tonga Treaty of 1900, which allowed missionaries of all faiths into the country; and defended the “good morals” of the Latter-day Saints Roberts had known in Samoa. He asked Rodwell and McOwan to use their influence to change the Tongan law,⁴⁷ but the high commissioner said he did not “feel justified in interfering with the Tongan Government in the matter.”⁴⁸

In late 1922 President Grant asked Senator Smoot to take further action. When Smoot queried Secretary Hughes on the matter, Hughes responded by telegraphing Roberts in Apia and instructing him to submit an official protest to the Tongan government. Roberts did as he was instructed.⁴⁹

In February 1923 President Grant once again encouraged Smoot to do what he could to solve the problem and sent him a letter from Coombs describing the problems in Tonga. Smoot forwarded the letter to Hughes and pressed him to use the “good offices of the State Department” to “induce the Kingdom of Tonga to repeal the Tongan Passport Act of 1922.” Three days later, on 13 March 1923, Hughes told Smoot that he had telegraphed Roberts in Apia and was waiting for a telegraphic report.⁵⁰ Within a week Roberts reported that he not only had protested the exclusion law by first mail after becoming aware of the problem, but also had again complained to the Tongan government according to the instructions he received on 27 November 1922. On 14 February 1923 he had once again requested that the premier of Tonga permit Latter-day Saints to enter the kingdom. When he received no reply, Roberts requested an answer by telegraph, but he received an evasive response. It is apparent that Quincy Roberts was diligent in pursuing the exclusion issue with the Tongan government.

The Tide Begins to Turn

On 26 March 1923 a frustrated Hughes entreated George Harvey, the U.S. ambassador in London, “to endeavor to obtain a favorable decision.” When Smoot learned of this action, he wrote to Ambassador Harvey with a personal plea for help. Harvey informed Lord Curzon, the secretary of state for foreign affairs, concerning the status of Latter-day Saints in Tonga and asked that any discrimination against them because of their faith be removed.⁵¹ In response, the next dispatch from the British colonial office to the high commissioner in Suva contained the duke of Devonshire’s observation that Churchill’s instructions on the matter “had reference only to Mormon Missionaries” and that the provisions of the Passport Act of 1922 “relate to Mormons generally.”⁵² The duke, secretary of state for the colonies, had uncovered a flaw in the act that would allow Britain to reconsider its actions without embarrassment. McOwan appears to have accepted the duke’s observation as a cue to act in a friendly manner toward the Latter-day Saints in Tonga.

Coombs knew nothing of this high-level string pulling, but on 25 June 1923 he had his first helpful encounter with McOwan. Coombs had previously sought McOwan’s assistance on the exclusion matter but had received a cool response. On this occasion two things appeared to Coombs to have brought a change in McOwan’s attitude: Coombs carried a British Commonwealth passport, and Coombs convinced McOwan that Latter-day Saints were not polygamists. Coombs must have driven his points home effectively, for at the end of the meeting McOwan offered to sponsor petitions to repeal the exclusion law in the Legislative Assembly and pass on such petitions to the British high commissioner in Suva.⁵³ But McOwan did not let the matter rest there. He also invited Coombs to play golf with him (an act that publicly announced McOwan’s approval of Coombs), encouraged other Europeans to sign Coombs’s petitions, and invited Coombs and his wife, LaVera, to be guests of honor at a special dance where the queen and her consort were in attendance.⁵⁴

Coombs became convinced that petitions were the best approach to the problem. For many months he worked on his case, enlisting the help of several able Tongans. He spent hundreds of hours writing petitions and finding people to sign them. During June 1924 Coombs submitted to the government a total of five documents arguing that on the basis of Articles IV and V of Tonga's constitution, the Latter-day Saint exclusion law was unconstitutional.⁵⁵ Coombs spoke with Chief Justice H. C. Stronge about the LDS Church's position on the matter but found that Stronge held a different interpretation of the laws.

The question of repealing the Latter-day Saint exclusion law was brought before the Tongan Legislative Assembly on 3 July 1924. The final debate was surprisingly short. Two Tongans, Siosaia Mataele and Finau Fisiiohi, a Tongan lawyer, both members of the Legislative Assembly, presented the LDS position before the assembly. The three most vocal Tongan opponents of the repeal petition were Prince Tungi, the new Tu'i Vakano, and Chief Ata. Coombs expected Chief Justice Stronge to oppose the repeal, but to Coombs's surprise Stronge supported the Latter-day Saints. "My views of the Mormons during the last two years have undergone a complete change," he explained. According to Coombs, he also said that "he had learned that the evidence on which he had condemned the Mormons was false and erroneous."⁵⁶ In view of the squabble between the Free Church and the Wesleyans, it was difficult for him to see what harm the Latter-day Saints could do. In his opinion they conducted themselves as peacefully as most other Tongans.

Stronge's change of attitude gave Coombs his first hint that the LDS position on the exclusion issue might prevail. Before the morning session ended, five more speeches were given in favor of the repeal petition. Shortly after lunch, however, it was proposed to refer the issue to the Privy Council. If this had happened, the Latter-day Saints almost certainly would have lost, for only two known friends of the church served on the Privy Council. Fortunately, this motion was defeated.

Victory for the Church

The matter was then put before the assembly for a vote. When the tally was counted, the vote stood at eleven in favor of repealing sections seven through nine of the 1922 Passport Act, with eight dissenting votes. Coombs and the Mormons had won.⁵⁷

The irony of this outcome was that even though Coombs had carefully enlisted the support of many friends, gathered as many Latter-day Saints as was possible for a "show of force," skillfully written a set of arguments using the Tongan constitution as the basis,⁵⁸ and personally talked to many government officials to try to change their minds, the law was repealed not so much because Coombs had fought his case well, but because of the problems between the Wesleyans and the members of the Free Church of Tonga. "The trouble between the Tongan Free Church and the Wesleyan Church," Coombs concluded, "has caused intense feeling among all people. All the nobles, except one, . . . are with the Queen and the Wesleyan Church. The representatives . . . are generally against the Queen and the Wesleyan Church and hence will readily support any cause objectionable to the Queen and nobles. The representatives, to a man, voted to grant our petition; two nobles, the Governor of Ha'apai and two members of the Privy Council also voted for us."⁵⁹

When Coombs received the official notice of the repeal, he sent a telegram to Salt Lake City informing President Grant of the good news. In his enthusiasm he also expressed his hope that the first three of twelve needed missionaries would be on their way immediately. To his dismay, on 25 October 1924 Coombs received a letter from the First Presidency congratulating him on the "splendid accomplishment" but informing him of a tentative

decision to withdraw missionaries from Tonga. Church leaders in Utah felt that the sacrifice of time and money in Tonga was out of proportion to the results obtained. Because Anthony W. Ivins, a counselor in the First Presidency, was visiting Hawaii, a final decision would not be made until his return. This meant that, at least for the time being, no new missionaries would be dispatched to Tonga.

The next day, Coombs posted a letter containing his most profound expressions of affection for the Tongan people and the mission: "But oh, Brethren, if it is not too late, let me plead for my people. This is the hardest proposition that I have ever faced in my life, and Brethren, I would rather lay down my life for them than to run off and leave them leaderless. They are my people, I have made my greatest sacrifices for them and have used my God-given talents in their behalf; I have bought them with seven years of my youth. I have rejoiced when they have rejoiced and have gone down in sorrow with them. I do not want to persuade you against your better judgement, but if we could have only four missionaries we could, at least, hold our own."⁶⁰ Coombs also told the presidency of recent increases in church attendance and better adherence to commandments, and he reminded them of a newly completed chapel. Perhaps his strongest argument was that the Latter-day Saints had a reputation as quitters because they had already left Tonga once before, in 1897.

Coombs's moving letter had the desired effect. On 28 November 1924 the First Presidency wrote, "We are in receipt of your letter of October 26 containing a very earnest appeal for the continuation of the Tongan mission and have decided that it shall continue." Missionaries would be sent "at once." Coombs did not receive this letter until 14 February 1925. By that time most of the problems of the mission had been resolved.⁶¹ The previous August, Coombs had leased a large plot of ground for a school at Mua, to be called Makeke, after he had received word that a new missionary couple was on their way. By then the Latter-day Saints numbered almost twelve hundred. Coombs and his wife continued in their positions until June 1926, when they were released to go home.

Conclusion

At the end of 1995 Tonga had approximately forty thousand Latter-day Saints living in 138 wards and branches composing thirteen stakes. One Tongan in every three is LDS, and thousands more Tongan Latter-day Saints are in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and elsewhere. This is remarkable considering the hurdles that were placed in the church's path during the period considered in this paper.

The first hurdle was the general attitude of disapproval toward the Latter-day Saints in both Tonga and Great Britain following World War I. That unpopularity opened the door for the Tongan legislature to pass the Latter-day Saint exclusion act. The situation was further complicated by problems caused by the split within the Tongan churches and the relationship of various factions to those churches and to the queen. The ramifications of these events made Coombs's efforts to get the law changed more complex than even he understood. He was convinced that legal and legislative practices common to the Western world could be used to solve the problem, but in retrospect it is clear that pressure from an outsider would not work. The problem and its solution were local matters that were secondary to other issues the Tongans were fighting about.

Fortunately for Coombs, when British officials in England were willing to allow a prejudicial law to be passed against the Latter-day Saints, officers of the U.S. government in Samoa and Washington, D.C.—Roberts and Hughes, respectively—were dedicated to rectifying what they believed was an improper and illegal situation. The eventual support from British representatives such as Islay McOwan also manifested a more evenhanded attitude than was shown by officials in England.

Finally, had it not been for the determination and tenacity of M. Vernon Coombs to seek the repeal of a hostile law and then to set passionately before the LDS Church leaders a strong case for continuing the Tongan mission, LDS membership among the Tongan people likely would be only a fraction of its current number. One man made a significant difference. It is hard to imagine what course history might have taken had Coombs not been the man he was. How small the hinge on which events turn. Coombs's efforts to reopen Tonga to Latter-day Saint missionaries and his heartfelt pleading to the First Presidency changed the history of the church in that land.

Notes

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1. The little island kingdom of Tonga is located about twenty degrees south of the equator in the Southwest Pacific. This 269-square-mile multi-island nation enjoys a pleasant climate similar to that of Hawaii. The principal islands support a relatively large population; two-thirds of Tonga's more than one hundred thousand residents live on the island of Tongatapu alone. The population has more than tripled since the 1920s. For information on the general history and background of Tonga, see Alfred H. Wood, *A History and Geography of Tonga* (Wodonga, Victoria, Australia: Border Morning Mail, 1972); Noel Rutherford, ed., *Friendly Islands: A History of Tonga* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Ian C. Campbell, *Island Kingdom: Tonga Ancient and Modern* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 1992).
2. See Leonard J. Arrington, "Crisis in Identity: Mormon Responses in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Mormonism and American Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 168–84. For general background on the Mormon polygamy issue, see James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).
3. See Malcolm R. Thorp, "The Mormon Peril: The Crusade against the Saints in Britain, 1910–1914," *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 69–88.
4. See Malcolm R. Thorp, "The British Government and the Mormon Question, 1910–1922," *A Journal of Church and State* 21 (spring 1979): 305–23.
5. Charles W. Forman, "Tonga's Tortured Venture in Church Unity," *Journal of Pacific History* 13/1–2 (1978): 3.
6. See Harold G. Cummins, ed., *Sources of Tongan History: A Collection of Documents, Extracts, and Contemporary Opinions in Tongan Political History, 1616–1900* (Nuku'alofa, Tonga: Tupou High School, 1972), 58.
7. See *ibid.*, 52–93; see also Sione Latukefu, "King George Tupou I of Tonga," in *Pacific Island Portraits*, ed. James W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976), 55–75; Martin Jarrett-Kerr, *Patterns of Christian Acceptance: Individual Response to the Missionary Impact, 1550–1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 171–88; and Noel Rutherford, *Shirley Baker and the King of Tonga* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996). A useful summary of the advent of Christianity in Tonga is found in chapters 3 and 4 of Alan R. Tippett, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia: Studies in the Dynamics of Church-Planting and Growth in Tahiti, New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971).
8. See Tippett, *People Movements*, 78–9, 111–26. Tippett has carefully reconstructed the elements of the comity agreement in the Tonga-Samoa area. See also Richard Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society, 1795–1895* (London: Oxford University Press, 1899), 1:284–5.
9. See Noel Rutherford, "George Tupou I and Shirley Baker," in *Friendly Islands*, ed. Rutherford, 157–63.

0. See note 8 above.
1. Elizabeth Wood Ellem, "Salote of Tonga and the Problem of National Unity," *Journal of Pacific History* 18 (July 1983): 165.
2. See Rutherford, "George Tupou I," 163–9; Mark Vernon Coombs, journal, 1920 to August 1926, typescript, 113, Historical Department, Archives Division, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).
3. See J. E. Curruthers, *Memories of an Australian Ministry* (London: n.p., 1922), 146–9.
4. Ellem, "Salote," 165.
5. See Rutherford, *Shirley Baker*, 169–70.
6. J. Egan Moulton Jr., "Tonga," in *A Century in the Pacific*, ed. James Colwell (London: n.p., 1914), 432.
7. See Basil Thompson, *The Diversions of a Prime Minister* (London: n.p., 1894), 16.
8. See Cummins, *Sources of Tongan History*, 385–6.
9. Coombs, journal, 113–4. See Ermel J. Morton, *Brief History of the Tongan Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (n.p.: Fiji Times Press [1968?]), 1.
0. See Morton, *Tongan Mission*, 7–10.
1. See Harold G. Reynolds (mission secretary) to Willard L. Smith, 1 September 1917, President's Correspondence, 1916–1925, Tongan Mission, LDS Church Archives (hereafter cited as President's Correspondence).
2. See Reed Smoot, Cumulative Correspondence, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Smoot Correspondence).
3. See Thorp, "British Government," 305–23; see also Reynolds to Smith, 5 March 1920, President's Correspondence.
4. M. Vernon Coombs to First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 22 December 1920, President's Correspondence; see also Coombs, journal, 53; Coombs to Junius F. Wells (Church Historian's Office), 8 November 1921, President's Correspondence. Wells was assistant Church historian.
5. See Coombs, journal, 78–83.
6. The landholding system of Tonga is rather unusual. All land is the property of the crown, but it is divided into large estates assigned to hereditary nobles. There is no privately owned land in the kingdom. Tongans and foreigners can lease land, but this is subject to the approval of the cabinet. The cabinet does not have to approve leases that are transferred from one holder to another, and it was this type of arrangement that appealed to Coombs when he was seeking land for a school.
7. See Coombs to Heber J. Grant, 24 January 1922, President's Correspondence. In this correspondence Coombs quotes a letter from U. M. Umafuke, acting minister of lands in Tonga. See also Coombs, journal, 117.
8. See Lord Milner (secretary of state for the colonies) to Cecil Hunter Rodwell (high commissioner for the western Pacific), 6 October 1919; and Roger Greene to Islay McOwan, 5 January 1920. Both letters are held by Records and Historical Services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Milton Keynes, England (hereafter cited as FCO).
9. See Tu'i Vakano to McOwan, 13 November 1919, FCO; and Tu'i Vakano to McOwan, 18 December 1919, FCO.
0. McOwan to Tu'i Vakano, 18 November 1919, FCO; see Tu'i Vakano to McOwan, 18 December 1919, FCO.
1. See Tu'i Vakano to Vice-Consul Masterton, 25 February 1920, FCO; and Rodwell to Milner, 24 March 1920, FCO.
2. See Milner to Rodwell, 12 August 1920, FCO; and Foreign Office to Passport Control Office, New York, 18 August 1920, FCO.

3. Tu'i Vakano to McOwan, 6 April 1921, FCO.
4. Winston Churchill to Rodwell, 19 December 1921, FCO. It is not clear from the records whether the British ambassador in Washington, D.C., actually contacted the U.S. State Department on this matter, or if they did, at what level discussion took place. Considering the response of Secretary Charles Evans Hughes when he learned about passage of the law, it appears doubtful that he was contacted about the proposed legislation. His involvement in the matter will be mentioned later.
5. See *Tongan Government Gazette* (18 July 1922): 113. See also "Annual Financial and Statistical Reports of the Missions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1922," LDS Church Archives; and translation of "Transcript of Minutes of the Legislative Assembly," 30 June 1922 (22 December 1923), President's Correspondence.
6. See Coombs to First Presidency, 13 February 1924, President's Correspondence.
7. Coombs to Heber J. Grant, 30 June, 4 August 1923, President's Correspondence.
8. Coombs to Grant, 14 July 1923, President's Correspondence.
9. Coombs to First Presidency, 26 January, 13 February 1924, President's Correspondence.
0. *Ibid.*, 13 February 1924.
 1. See Coombs, journal, 118. Because much social disruption was caused when the native practice of polygamy was stopped in Tonga in the 1830s and 1840s, it is not surprising that this practice was at the head of the list of complaints against the Latter-day Saints.
 2. Translation of "Transcript of the Minutes of the Legislative Assembly of Tonga," June 30, 1922, President's Correspondence. This problem was considered a serious one by Prince Tungi long before the legislative debate took place. In a 1921 interview with Prince Tungi, Elder David O. McKay of the LDS Church's Council of the Twelve Apostles asked him, "Upon what grounds do you object to our missionaries?" Prince Tungi replied, "The other churches were here first and their ministers think that you are taking too many of their people away from them" (Coombs, journal, 120).
 3. Coombs was misinformed concerning the power of the high commissioner (as was the U.S. vice-consul in Apia): the high commissioner's authority did not extend beyond consultation and advice, and he could not invalidate the passport law even if he deemed it desirable to do so.
 4. Coombs to Grant, 16 February 1923, President's Correspondence.
 5. *Ibid.*, 28 December 1922, President's Correspondence; see also Coombs, journal, 122.
 6. See Coombs, journal, 156, 188–9.
 7. See Quincy F. Roberts to Tu'i Vakano, 28 August 1922, FCO; see also Roberts to Rodwell, 28 August 1922, FCO; Roberts to McOwan, 28 August 1922, FCO; Roberts to Charles Evans Hughes, 31 August 1922, FCO and Smoot Correspondence.
 8. McOwan to Rodwell, 7 September 1922. See Rodwell to McOwan, 11 September 1922, FCO; and Roger Greene to Roberts, 20 October 1922, FCO.
 9. See Roberts to Hughes, 21 March 1923; and Hughes to Smoot, 19 December 1922, Smoot Correspondence.
 0. See Smoot to Hughes, 10 March 1923; see also Hughes to Smoot, 13 March 1923, Smoot Correspondence.
 1. See Hughes to Smoot, 26 March 1923; Smoot to George Harvey, 11 April 1923, Smoot Correspondence; Harvey to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, 13 April 1923, FCO; Foreign Office to Post Wheeler, 29 May 1923, FCO.
 2. Duke of Devonshire to Rodwell, 12 June 1923, FCO. The duke's full name was Victor Christian William Cavendish, the ninth duke of Devonshire.
 3. See Coombs, journal, 139–40.
 4. See *ibid.*, 143–4, 194–5.

5. See Cummins, *Sources of Tongan History*, 193.
6. Coombs, journal, 196.
7. See *ibid.*, 194, 196–7.
8. Coombs argued his case under three general headings. He pointed out that on constitutional grounds the exclusion law was not legal because (1) the section did not affect all classes equally, (2) it was retrospective in its ultimate effect, and (3) it was provocative of discrimination against the Latter-day Saints.
9. “Annual Financial and Statistical Reports of the Missions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924,” LDS Church Archives.
0. Coombs to First Presidency, 26 October 1924, President’s Correspondence.
1. The internal squabbles between the Free Church of Tonga and the Wesleyan Church were not having a direct bearing on the LDS mission, unlike the time when Prince Tungi considered the LDS Church a threat to Tongan unity. The conflict between the Free Church and the Wesleyan Church had calmed down when the elderly Watkin died on 23 January 1925, leaving the Free Church without its most enthusiastic supporter and leader. At the time of his death, Watkin had been head of the Free Church of Tonga for forty years and a missionary in Tonga for fifty-nine years.