

Interaction Between Government and Religion in Papua New Guinea

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Since man first walked upright, he has acknowledged a power greater than his own. We call this “religion”. However, religious intolerance and intolerance of religion have been two of the root causes of disharmony in society since the beginning of recorded history.

In this 20th century, and with our increasing urge to know more about our ancestors, we have harnessed the miracles of technology, to open windows into the past. We know an amazing amount about life in ancient Egypt, about the Greeks, and the Romans, the Palestinians, and the Jews, and about the great peoples of Asia and India.

Throughout all these societies, there has been a common thread of worship, worship of a gallery of gods, as diverse as the races who paid them homage. For thousands of years, these gods, and the honour paid to them, were the foundation of the daily life of the societies, over which they ruled. Ordinary daily life was controlled by the all-powerful nature of the religious structure, and the rules and laws of the community flowed from that source.

Great wars and hideous deeds have been a seemingly-inescapable companion to the growth or decline of religions, and their gods. We have only to think of the crusades, waged by Christian Europe, in its struggle with the infidels of the Middle East; the horrors of the Spanish inquisition; the Holocaust of the Second World War, with the attempted eradication of the Jews as a people, and Judaism as a religion; or the continuing clashes of our own day.

Within Christianity, we see Ireland destroying itself, as Protestant battles with Catholic. Within newly-democratic Central and Eastern Europe, we see Muslims and Christians locked in a deadly struggle. And in the Middle East, the age-old struggle between Jew and Arab seems as insoluble as ever.

What has been our experience in the South Pacific, where the arrival of Christianity, and other religions, has been, in historical terms, very recent?

It is true that the first missionaries to the South Pacific were, on the whole, more interested in gathering souls than in gathering riches, although sometimes the two went hand-in-hand.

It is also true that they believed in the absolute superiority of their product, their religion, and its mighty God. Their perception of the “natives” of the South Pacific was that of animist societies, devoid of worship, devoid of Christian humanity and love. We were “pagans”, ungodly savages, to be saved from ourselves, by our more enlightened, and holier, brothers. It is fair to say that the zeal that so often typifies missionary effort had blinded these well-meaning soul gatherers to the reality.

The reality was that all South Pacific societies had religious systems that worked for them; that many of these were hundreds, and even thousands, of years old, and that the social structures flowed from them, with the same inevitability as they did from Christianity.

In Papua New Guinea, as in other South Pacific nations, there was a belief in the immortality of the soul, and in the life to come. There was a belief in the omnipotence of the people’s gods, and the sacrifices and penances of the Old Testament, frequently and conveniently overlooked by “modern” Christians, had their parallels in our societies. Concepts of absolute moral right and wrong were as much a part of our communities as they supposedly are of Christianity, or other major religions. It is reasonable to say that our traditional tribal gods served us very well in Papua New Guinea, and throughout the Pacific.

How then do we account for the universality of Christianity throughout the region, and the considerable inroads of other religious beliefs in even more recent times?

There is an inescapable link between religion and power, between religion and conquest – spiritual or secular. Papua New Guinea had not one or two, but hundreds, of traditional religions, as the nation, today, continues to

have hundreds of tribes, and hundreds of languages. There was very little overlap between these societies at the time of the first missionaries.

It is not hard to see that a religion that was accompanied by obvious material wealth, a religion that had the fascination of total novelty, and a religion that was generally backed by an administration of ever-increasing weaponry and might, was to prove irresistible.

I well remember, as young man, the consuming anger I felt when a missionary destroyed the traditional flutes of my people, saying they were evil, and justifying his terrible action in the name of God.

From the beginning of the Christian era in Papua New Guinea, and I believe throughout the Pacific, religion and government have been interwoven. It is true that they have often failed to see eye to eye. Successive colonial administrators, some of whom were “Christian” by convention, rather than conviction, often regretted the missionaries, who seemed to stand in the way of colonial commerce, and the clear need to exploit the resources of this strange colony. Yet, to all intents and purposes, Christianity and the colonial administrations seemed, to the people, like two faces of the one coin.

The administration found that Christian religions were in heady competition with each other to convert the tribes of Papua New Guinea. To avoid unseemly bickering, religious “spheres of influence” were created for the major denominations – the Methodist, the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the London Missionary Society, and the Lutherans. To this day, the major Christian religions continue to reflect that early subdivision, and Christian names continue to echo the nations, from which those denominations came. There can be few third-world nations with two provinces, where ancient Anglo-Saxon names such as “Osric”, “Philswide”, and “Canute” are still in regular use; or where, in another region, it has become customary to name your sons “Hubert”, or “Otto”, or “Herman”!

During the Second World War, much of the two territories of Papua and New Guinea experienced their first wave of non-European and non-Christian newcomers. These were the invading Japanese, many of whom continued to worship as they had done at home. Circumstances, combined

with the total unfamiliarity of language and custom, and the brevity of the encounter – at the most, four years – have left little, if any, religious impact on Papua New Guinea.

Following the war, the Australian administration returned, with a clear policy of running the country, still officially two territories, as one administrative unit. The Christian churches, now firmly entrenched in the major urban areas, began their post-war wave of outreach, and small Christian outposts began to appear in parts of the country that had been “off limits” to all before the war.

At the same time, and in an atmosphere of administrative peace, the arrival of new denominations has been most marked in Papua New Guinea, with the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches undertaking a remarkable level of dialogue.

By the mid-1960s, young Papua New Guineans were beginning to plan for an independent nation. Australia was aware of its responsibility to prepare its colonies for that day, but they were following a time frame that would have seen my nation gain its independence at the turn of the century.

The churches, in general, were agents of conservatism, concerned that their flocks might be scattered by too-early independence, and the huge amount of rebuilding, they had undertaken after the war, might once again have to be faced. It is fair to say that most churches had individual clergy, who were honourable exceptions to this rule, and who privately encouraged their young Papua New Guinean members to fight for independence.

By the early 1970s, it was clear that self-determination, as a precursor to full independence, could not be far away. Changes in the Australian government, and the emergence of a cohesive group of young Papua New Guineans, drawn from all over the two territories, pointed the way. They were not drawn from one denomination, and they were not, as a group, the product of any one church. In 1973, self-government was declared. Some churches feared the worst, fears that proved groundless.

On September 16, 1975, I stood with the representatives of all the major churches; with the first Governor-General designate, the late Sir John

Guise; with heads-of-state, and diplomats from all over the world, and heard Prince Charles declare Papua New Guinea a sovereign independent nation.

As first Prime Minister, I had for my guidance a constitution, which guaranteed the rights of the people, and which declared Papua New Guinea to be a “Christian nation”. Explicit guarantees were written into that constitution, guaranteeing the inalienable right of freedom of religion and worship, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement.

Those rights continue to apply 18 years later. Papua New Guinea is, by constitutional definition, “A Christian nation”. At the same time, all other religions have the same right to worship and develop. In recent years, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Bahai’s, Jews, Confucianists, and many others, have appeared in Papua New Guinea. They have settled, opened their houses of worship, and their schools, and blended with the population.

At the same time, there has been growing disquiet over the role of other churches and groups in the community. This disquiet has led to questions in Parliament, and demands for restrictions on the influx of new Christian sects into the country.

What has caused this breakdown of tolerance, and what is the government attitude towards this influx?

Papua New Guineans have observed that some of these “new” churches appear less concerned with fishing for souls than they are with fishing the seas, and less inclined to plant the seed of the good word than they are to plant cash crops. There is a suspicion that “Christianity” is being used – and they with it – for purely commercial gain. The immigration and business investment laws of the nation restrict the flow of wheeler-dealer exploiters; it is less easy to restrict the flow of supposed “churches”, which are always quick to gain adherents to their cause.

Papua New Guinea is rich soil for spiritual exploitation. The nation is in a period of enormous change, where traditional and established, imported beliefs are being challenged, where materialism is becoming all-important, and where the population is, overwhelmingly, under the age of 25.

With a high birth rate, ever-growing expectations that cannot readily be met in the short term, vast, almost unlimited, resources, and established churches, seen as unable to meet the new challenges, we have a potentially explosive recipe in the new religious movements or “sects”.

There can be little doubt that some of the “charismatic” and “born-again” movements, with their emphasis on speaking in tongues, rock music, and hard-sell evangelism, prove attractive to youngsters. Some of these groups are doubtless sincere in their approach. Some have doubtless recognised that the sometimes-cold formality of European-style church services makes an ill match with the more volatile and open character of Papua New Guineans. But, there are many of us in Parliament, who question the motives behind sects, which couple their zeal for souls with an equal passion for land, for resources, and for wealth.

What has been the real contribution of the established Christian churches to the welfare of the state? This is an easier question to answer.

Since Christianity’s earliest days in Papua New Guinea, it has been a practical religion, as concerned with the physical and secular welfare of its parishioners, as with their spiritual well-being. Throughout the nation, Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and United church administrations have built hospitals, nursing schools, primary and high schools, teacher-training colleges, technical schools, and tertiary institutions. They have a proud record of practical achievements, in the name of God, and many a modern Papua New Guinean leader owes his education, and often his health, to the churches. The colonial administration encouraged these developments by the churches, and assisted, as best it could.

Successive governments of independent Papua New Guinea have followed the same course of action, providing state-trained teachers for church-agency schools, state doctors for church hospitals, and considerable budgetary funding, across the board for the churches’ health and education initiatives. We can say that the relationship of these churches and others, such as the Salvation Army, with the national government, has been an understanding one, free of major disruptions.

But Papua New Guinea's life is complex, and likely to become more so, in the future. Law and order problems in our society are real, and the solutions are long-term, and sometimes evasive. The major issue is one of employment, and the need to involve the urban young gainfully in the economy. At the same time, we need to develop industries in rural areas that will help stem the flow of people, attracted by the lights of the cities, cities which cannot absorb them, clothe them, feed them, give them work, or accommodate them.

Are the churches to only look after the victims of this period of change and disruption? Is their role to be one of purely pastoral care? Will their "good works" of the future be only band-aid reactions to the wounds of an uncaring society?

I believe there is an enormous role for the churches to play in the immediate future. They must take up the role of supporting family life, far more convincingly than they have. Papua New Guinea's social ills increase as family life, with its imprinted ethics and morals, declines. Much of that decline, and much of the collapse of traditional morality, is directly the result of the "Westernisation" of our society. That is a fact, and it is a fact that we should waste no time mourning.

Papua New Guinea, and much of the Pacific, is being catapulted into the future, and the trend is non-reversible. We cannot return to the past. Nor should we. What we need, and where the churches can help, is to reach out to youth, with ethical and moral values, with discipline, and with a determination to provide pride in being a Papua New Guinean, pride in being part of a family.

Far too often, parents in a society in flux, such as mine, face a sense of hopelessness. The gap between them, and their children, in education, in outlook, in beliefs, seems bottomless. If churches are looking for an agenda for the 1990s, and the next century, it must be to help the government of the day to underpin, and develop, the structure of the family.

Some churches, in their haste to obtain converts, centre their whole ministry on the young. Parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents, mature and experienced adults, who have survived and prospered, are often ignored by

the churches, in their rush for the young. In doing this, churches ignore a major resource, in reaching their goal, for a wise use of older people would strengthen the family unit, go far towards bridging the generation gap, and give the whole society a renewed sense of Christian purpose.

I believe the best relationship possible between church and state, in my country, is one based on trust. I do not believe that Papua New Guinea should be a church state, with a preeminent denomination. Equally, I do not believe the constitution should ignore the overwhelmingly Christian nature of the nation. Therefore, it seems to me that trust and mutual understanding of aims and goals must be the basis for the future relationship between church and state.

If the two organisations are to turn in an optimum performance, they must work together. Churches must foster family values more openly, make far more use of the media, make far more effort to contact, and welcome, the over-25s, and tap their maturity and experience. And governments must take the values of religion into practical account, when they seek solutions to the major issues of the day, such as the social cost of economic development, and the law-and-order situation.

If this level of trust and cooperation can be fostered and developed, and if “fly-by-night” operations, which pay only lip-service to Jesus Christ and Christianity, can be exposed, I believe the constitutional guarantees, so explicitly in our constitution, will remain untouched, and the relationship between church and state will grow in strength.

(Address given at the South Pacific Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), held at Suva, Fiji, on July 9, 1993.)