

New Religious Groups in Papua New Guinea

Political and Theological Implications

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Jesus Christ is becoming a popular political figure in Papua New Guinea today. During the recent election campaign, some candidates included images of Jesus on their campaign posters, and at a post-election prayer service, the Prime Minister declared that Jesus was the real Prime Minister of the nation. A new government has been elected and the first declaration of the Speaker was about how prayers should be said in the parliamentary sessions. Such events as these would be regarded as bizarre in a country with a secular ideology like Australia, but in contemporary Papua New Guinea public demonstrations of Christian faith are accepted as quite the right thing to do.

Political scientists in Papua New Guinea have not given much attention to religion in the politics of previous elections. Political analyst Ray Anere notes a study showing that in the 1987 elections, “same school/church” was insignificant in people’s choice of candidate.¹ R.J. May (1996, 229) says that the “Operation Jesus-Election 92” in Wewak had little visible impact.² However, there are indicators that religion has

¹ It was only significant for 1.4% of the voters. See *Catalyst* 26 (1996) Table 3.

² In their study of the 1968 elections in East New Britain for the First House of Assembly, A. Chowning, A.L. and T.S. Epstein, J. Goodale, and I. Grosart write: “Although there is some evidence that interested Catholics sought, without complete success, to deter strong Catholic candidates from opposing one another, it is unlikely that religion alone was the decisive factor which determined voting behaviour” (Epstein, Parker, and Reay ed. 1971, p.85).

become much more significant in the build up to the recent 1997 elections. There was a constant use of religious language from both candidates and voters, and the churches became involved to a much greater degree than ever before. Four Catholic priests stood for election, two being successful. The Catholic Commission for Justice Peace and Development mounted a campaign involving diocesan political awareness teams and the public promotion of their message through booklets, posters and billboards. Meanwhile Christians, led by some of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, started a movement called "Operation Brukim Skru" (Operation Bended Knee)—a prayer campaign devoted to ensuring that the election would be held peacefully and that the right leaders would be chosen.

Surely there are lessons to be learned from these events. What motivated the unprecedented involvement of the churches in politics? Was this a movement from within the local churches or was it influenced by interests outside of the country? What are the gains and the pitfalls of such involvement? How can these events be evaluated theologically? Questions such as these provided the initial impetus for this study. However, upon going more deeply into the topic it became apparent that the approach of the Catholic Church and the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches differ considerably. Hence the focus of this paper is the political involvement of the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and how their theology of involvement in the "world" both contrasts and parallels that of the Catholic Church.

The first part of this paper studies the recent events from a sociological perspective. The latter part takes on a more theological stance. I have tried to be sympathetic to various theological opinions, though I must acknowledge from the outset my position in the Catholic Church and hence my own conscious and unconscious biases. I hope that discussion on this paper will contribute to a deeper understanding for people of all denominations.

New Religious Groups³

There are many forms of New Religious Groups (NRGs) in Papua New Guinea. *Firstly*, some come in the form of "churches," usually in competition with the mainline churches. These are like those studied by Manfred Ernst (1994) in his

³ For official Catholic views on the New Religious Movements, see: For official Catholic views on the New Religious Movements, see *Sects or New Religions*

study of NRGs in the Pacific. He includes churches like the Seventh Day Adventist and Assemblies of God in this category. *Secondly*, there are various “movements” flourishing within the churches, including the Catholic Church. Some are “imported” like the “Legion of Mary.” Others seem to have emerged spontaneously as indigenous expressions of faith, like the “God Triwan” movement in the Diocese of Wabag.⁴ *Thirdly* there are movements developing in society, seemingly independent of the churches. These are often termed “cargo cults.”

However one tries to classify these groups, there remain problems of terminological confusion and this is not helped by there being almost as many theories as there are scholars. Terminology often shows a conscious or unconscious bias. No doubt some members of conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches would not want to apply the term “New Religious Movement” to their churches. However, it should be noted from the outset that the term “movement” can have positive connotations, for example when the term is applied to popular associations like the “charismatic” movement or the “Marian” movement.

The complexity is compounded when one tries to assess the political orientation of the three groups mentioned above. The NRGs in the first category usually profess to be apolitical. They tend to see the present world as evil and wicked in stark contrast to the world to come and the glorious return of Christ. With the end of the second millennium approaching, some people are preoccupied with the second coming of Christ. Perhaps influenced by the New Christian Right in the USA, they tend to regard religious and political liberalism and secular humanism as enemies of God and governments. However, their professedly apolitical position in effect is quite political as their stance contributes to the maintenance of the societal status quo.⁵

Movement: Pastoral Challenge (The Pontifical Councils for Promoting Christian Unity, for Interreligious Dialogue, for Dialogue with non-Believers, and the Council of Culture, Rome, 1986); also, Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG/SI, “Pastoral Letter on Small Religious Groups,” 1994.

⁴ The God Triwan Movement is a home-grown renewal movement which is very innovative in inculturating the Christian message in the Catholic church in the Diocese of Wabag.

⁵ More recently the so-called “Moral Majority” in the USA have tried to transform private fundamentalism into political gain.

Many of the groups in the second category—those developing within the Church—are influenced by the charismatic movement.⁶ Most of these groups preach an other-worldly salvation, yet, their roots in the cosmic religiosity of their culture do not permit them to totally divorce their religious practice from social and political realities. While decrying the evils of modernization and the corruption they perceive in local politics, they tend to have little problem with accepting government funding for church buildings, musical instruments or religious rallies, thus compromising their freedom to protest when the need would arise.

The movements developing independently of the churches are often highly political. For example, Peter Worsley (1968) places the Yali movement in the period of transition between a very embryonic national consciousness and political self-determination. Many other examples could be given. Such “cults” in their classic form are less apparent today, possibly because of the chance afforded by the groups in the first two categories, and possibly because politics has emerged as the most effective way to “cargo.”

This paper focuses on the churches in the first category, particularly those conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that stress being “born again.”⁷ Following Ernst I will use the term: New Religious Groups because I think it is a more neutral term.

The Catholic Bishops’ Campaign in Preparation for the 1997 Elections

The Catholic bishops of Papua New Guinea mounted two campaigns in the year before the elections: one to conscientize people on their political rights and the other to try to keep priests out of politics.

The awareness campaign, costing over K200,000 (US\$150,000) comprised of training for political awareness teams, glossy booklets in English and Tok Pisin, posters, billboards and advertising in newspapers. The aim

⁶ Hence they share an experience of the manifestation of the Spirit, in common with groups such as the Assemblies of God, Christian Revival Crusade and the Four Square Gospel Church.

⁷ Here, “born again” refers to Christians who have made a conscious act of repenting from sin and accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour. There is a general belief among born again Christians that only people who believe that Christ is their personal Saviour will have eternal life.

was to try to convince people that they had God-given political rights, and that their vote was something special which should not be sold or traded for material gain. People were told that those who accept bribery are simply selling out their own lives and the lives of their families. It is hard to assess the effectiveness of such a campaign. Observers in some of the provinces thought that it had at least some effect.⁸

The bishops' campaign to stop priests entering politics was not successful. In April 1996, in a letter addressed to priests, seminarians and religious, they wrote: "We bishops emphasize that we do not want any Catholic priest or seminarian or religious to become involved politically by running for office in 1997 or at any other time." They warned that anyone ignoring this prohibition would be suspended entirely from the exercise of his faculties and public ministry in the church. Despite the warning, four diocesan priests stood for election and two were successful. Fr. Robert Lak is now governor of the Western Highlands Province and Fr. Louis Ambane is governor of the neighbouring Simbu Province.⁹ Both have been suspended from public sacramental ministry.¹⁰

The bishops' efforts were complicated by persistent rumours about Catholic ambitions to "take over" the government. Some people interpreted the church's political awareness campaign as part of the plot. Such rumors are not new, but they persist and grow in ingenuity. Sometimes the rumors concern the number of the "beast" in the book of Revelation. At other times they have to do with "world money." The postage stamp to commemorate Pope John Paul's visit to Papua New Guinea for the "beautification" (sic) of Peter To Rot was seen by some as a sure sign of the immanent take over by Rome. These rumours, spread by members of churches like the Seventh Day Adventists, may seem laughable to outsiders, but are indeed troubling to many people, especially those in the more isolated areas of the country.

⁸ Doug Young, in the Enga Province. Personal communication.

⁹ The way the two priests voted with Hon. Bill Skate to form the present government has led to accusations of hypocrisy because they are now partners in government with the parties they had strongly criticized during their campaigning.

¹⁰ Opinions vary as to whether the suspension is justified. Many national priests think that it is quite possible to serve as a priest-politician.

Sandline

On the national level there were two principal issues during the 1997 election campaign: corruption and the Sandline issue. There have been a growing number of accusations of corruption in the government. The accusations rose to new levels when it was found that the Prime Minister had authorized a secret multi-million kina deal involving a mercenary force to train soldiers and to fight in Bougainville.

This quick-fix deal with the "Sandline International" company backfired badly on the government, with a near military coup and rioting in the streets of the capital, Port Moresby. Eventually the Prime Minister, his Deputy and the Minister of Defence had to stand down to allow for an official enquiry into the affair. The mainline churches could not present a united front. Catholic Archbishop Karl Hesse made a press release expressing his deep concern at reports that mercenaries had been covertly engaged for service in Bougainville, while Lutheran Bishop Gam, caused something of a furore when he supported the government on the Sandline issue (*Post Courier* 16 May 1997, p.4).

Born again Christians achieved a good deal of publicity during the Sandline crisis. The Governor General, Sir Wiwa Korowi, published a full page press release in the daily paper calling on people to "get down to your knees and pray and ask God to give you and me a total peace of mind that we need to endure."¹¹ The military commander who sparked off the crisis, Brigadier General Singirok, said that his decision to denounce the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence minister, was based on ethical principles and his Christian convictions. He is reported as saying that he was an instrument used by God.¹²

¹¹ Sir Wiwa Korowi is a member of the Evangelical Bible Mission. He continued, "All Christians during the time of crisis of the magnitude of this type, you should get down on your knees and pray to God for his divine ruling over the affairs of men."

¹² *Post Courier* 11 June 1997, p.1. Jerry Singirok has been very quiet since it was revealed that he had a bank account in London containing a large sum of money supplied by a British arms dealer. At the height of the crisis, the Prime Minister of Fiji, Sitiveni Rabuka, while on a visit to Croatia, phoned both the Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan, and General Singirok to read to them Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities....." (*Post Courier* 15 April 1997, pp.1,5).

The development in religious rhetoric did not go unnoticed in the press. On April 3, *The National* published an editorial entitled, "God as a political weapon." The writer said, "The countdown to the elections has led to a sharp rise in the use of God as a political weapon... It is all too easy for devout Christians to delude themselves into believing that they are some kind of 'chosen vessel' through which God's will must be channeled to the people" (*The National* 3 April, 1997, p.14).

The Defence Force

Besides Sandline, there have been other issues giving a high profile to Christians in the Defence Force. For example there was a move by some born again Christians in the military to establish a mission of "spiritual operations" in war-torn Bougainville. Their sincerity is not in question, but the objective observer must surely question the appropriateness of their mission to "break the power of Satan over Bougainville." The objectives of the mission are set out as follows:

1. to break the main power of the Devil which has been assigned specially to look after the New Guinea Islands excluding Manus;
2. to break the principalities which have been assigned specifically to look after each district in Bougainville;
3. to break the evil power for cargo cult, conflicts, religious pride, divisions in Provincial Government and in churches, and lust and love for money, etc.;
4. to pray for God's protection over the Security Forces members, assets, etc; to raise an army of prayer warriors in all districts of Bougainville;
5. to witness to surrendered BRA about Jesus Christ as a rehabilitation programme;
6. to conduct crusades as an awareness to people about God;
7. to conduct awareness of God in public places, and
8. To distribute Bibles and Bible tracts to people.

The mission to send the army of "prayer warriors" to Bougainville was abandoned after Bishop Brian Barnes, chairman of Heads of Churches Committee, wrote to Brigadier General Singirok (11 Oct. 1996) expressing his amazement that private soldiers had been identified for detachment to Bougainville for spiritual duties. This was contrary to the policy that

spiritual duties were always the sole responsibility of official chaplains.¹³

Though it might appear to be an honest evangelization effort, the proponents were surely not blind to the side effect of the mission undermining the Catholic efforts at reconciliation in Bougainville. The Bougainville population is 80 percent Catholic, and the Catholic Church has been trying to work closely with the people throughout the time of the conflict. The Church's solidarity with the people in their plight has aroused suspicion on the part of some in the National Government and in the Papua New Guinea Defence Force. This was not an isolated incident. In the past there had been conflicts stemming from involvement of Defence Force officers using their authority to promote spiritual activities.¹⁴

Operation Brukim Skru

The most significant involvement of the churches in the political process came with a prayer movement called "Operation Brukim Skru." All the churches were involved, though the initiative in most cases lay with the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal groups.

Involvement in politics had been an issue with the Evangelical churches at least since the Evangelical Fellowship of the South Pacific meeting in Brisbane in August 1990. The following year Honiara hosted the first South Pacific Prayer Assembly. The theme was "Godly National Leadership" and there were over 200 participants. The second Prayer Assembly, again at Honiara, drew about 320 participants. Papua New Guinea held its first National Prayer Assembly in October 1992 and hosted the Third South Pacific Prayer Assembly in July 1993 in Port Moresby. Since then there have been many other initiatives by the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

At the National Prayer Assembly in Port Moresby, people went to the parliament to pray for unity. Provincial groups came forward to claim their Province for Christ. Sir Peter Lus, member for Maprik and a former pastor in the South Seas Evangelical Church, led the group to the parliament to pray. The group of over a thousand Christians joined hands in a

¹³ The bishop also wondered at the choice of the reference number of the Minute for appointing the soldiers. It was R666-1-1!

¹⁴ In the Bana area, the soldiers from the IPIR insulted the sisters and beat up the Catholic priest, Fr. Tony Navaka, so badly that he nearly died and had to be hospitalized.

human chain around the parliament and prayed to cast out spirits of evil within the house of assembly. In 1994 there was a special seminar at the Airways Hotel. The Governor General attended, and this set him on the road to becoming a born again Christian.

At the end of August 1996 the prayer campaign entered a new stage. Marlyn Stuckey had begun a National Prayer Center near Mount Hagen. While praying there, he and his friends felt that Christians were being called to have an impact in society, including on politics. They mentioned the idea to a few people, and everyone said, "This is what we have been praying for!" So they went ahead. That is how Operation Brukim Skru began as a prayer campaign for the election of a God-fearing government.¹⁵

In January 1996, the involvement intensified. The question surfaced whether there should be Christian volunteers to work at the polling sites in order to provide "prayer cover" during the actual polling. Marlyn was wary at first. But then he felt that God was saying, "Why pray if you're not prepared to be the answer to your prayers?" In other words, committed Christians were being called to have a socio-political impact. The leaders of Operation Brukim Skru then set out to find 20,000 Christian volunteers. The goals were as follows:

1. To pray on site (to counter pressure, corruption, threats). This is to offer a "prayer cover."
2. Keep corruption out of the polling places.
3. Offer a testimony: doing something for free.

The Electoral Commissioner supported the idea, but as it turned out the plan ran into some political hurdles and only a few hundred Christian volunteers did in fact serve in that capacity during the elections. Nevertheless the plan itself showed an unprecedented willingness for conservative Christians to be directly involved in the electoral process.

While these events were unfolding, the National Intelligence Organisation (NIO) started investigating Operation Brukim Skru. A report in *The National* on April 2 carried the headline, "NIO: Plot by leading citizens" (*The National* 2 April 1997, p.1). A report in the *Post Courier* the previous day included the following:

¹⁵ Conversation with Marlyn Stuckey in Mount Hagen, 2 May, 1997. Marlyn's parents are with SIL and have translated the New Testament into the Melpa language.

The Prime Minister said he believed people involved with the religious movement Operation Brukim Skru had a lot to answer for in the troubles of the past week or two. He said the mainline churches had created benefits for the people [sic] of Papua New Guinea, with institutions like schools, but the more recently introduced religious movements behind Operation Brukim Skru played on "people's emotions." The problems we see are that in the past 10 to 14 days, as part of this, they have caused this problem, working on people's emotions (sic) to stir up trouble. "I know there are very influential people in this movement and we have to be very careful. But churches should not use emotion to achieve an end. It's a result of that, that the nation was in chaos." (*Post Courier* 1 April 1997, p.4).

A secret NIO report speculated that there could be a deliberate plot by politically minded Christians, riding on the wave of anti-corruption sentiments and using the Sandline issue as a means to further their political ambitions. The report noted that this was "not the first time that misguided religious fanatics, blinded by their own virtue and by their concept of what is right and wrong, have attempted to assume power though [sic] any means possible."¹⁶ In a belated reply, apparently referring to the same NIO report, the Governor General announced on national television and in a full-page press statement that the "'Operation Brukim Skru' cannot be meddled with politics, Sandline evil and satanic motives of our own making (sic)." He declared, "NIO has got very pathetic lying habits and they are out to create sensational stories to carry out character assassination of people [sic]" (*Post Courier* 18 September 1997, p.13; *The National* 18 September 1997, p.3).

The NIO report does paint a biased and inaccurate picture of Operation Brukim Skru. There is a good chance that the situation could have got right out of hand if there were not so many committed Christians at the forefront of the protests. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that some unscrupulous people might use the movement as an excuse to further their own agenda.

¹⁶ In a letter in *The Independent* (11 April 1997, 8) from "Concerned Expatriate, Mt Hagen" the writer disagreed with the NIO report and noted that Mainstream churches were the chief supporters of the movement. This was true in places like Hagen and Wabag. However, in Port Moresby, the Catholic Church had very little involvement with Operation Brukim Skru. Operation Brukim Skru organised public prayer meetings for Port Moresby Christians the night before the elections and the Sunday after the announcement of the results and on both occasions Catholic representatives were conspicuous by their absence.

The outcome of the elections is ambiguous, with the parties from the previous government still in power. Those associated with Operation Brukim Skru are happy to see that a number of the leading players in the new government are professed Christians. In a rally at the Boroko United Church on 27 July, 1997, the Governor General and the Prime Minister were quite jubilant. The Prime Minister pointed out that now the Governor General, the Chief Justice and himself were born again Christians and that the new speaker of the house is a devout Christian (SDA). "Jesus has conquered Satan here in PNG," he said. It is notable that now the heads of the judicial, executive and legislative arms of government are either SDA or "born-again" Christians. When asked how they felt about the results of the elections, some of the leaders of Operation Brukim Skru replied that, though the results were a surprise, they were not overly concerned because everything was in "God's hands." The common opinion in the Pentecostal and Evangelical circles is that people have prayed to God, God has heard their prayers and will intervene whenever necessary so that the divine plan for the nation might be fulfilled.

Trends in the 1997 Parliament

Two Catholic priests have been elected to the new parliament. However, there has been a definite swing away from the mainline churches towards the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Provisional data on the religious affiliation in the new 109 seat parliament reveals that the mainline churches (Catholic, United, Lutheran, Anglican) have 10 less members in the new parliament. On the other hand the Seventh Day Adventists have increased by six, and the "other" churches, including Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, have increased by four. To what degree this change was influenced by Operation Brukim Skru will be debated for some time. It should be noted that some high-profile Christians, like a former moderator of the United Church, and the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, were not successful in the elections.

Details from the elections are given in the table below.¹⁷ The figures do not prove anything, but they do indicate a definite trend away from

¹⁷ The data is from *The Governments of Papua New Guinea* (1996), supplemented by personal enquiries. The table presumes that all members have affiliation with some church group. The figures do not presume to say anything about the quality of the affiliation or membership in the church.

the historical mainline churches. It is still an open question whether the trend is indicative of church involvement in politics in the recent elections, or rather, whether it represents a change in church affiliation amongst the general population in Papua New Guinea?¹⁸

Table 4
Comparing Church Affiliation in the 1993 and 1997
Papua New Guinea Parliaments

CHURCH	Elected Members in 1993 Parliament	Elected Members in 1997 Parliament	Increase Decrease
Catholic	37	32	-5
Lutheran	24	18	-6
United	13	12	-1
Anglican	6	8	+2
SDA	11	17	+6
Christian Life	2	5	+3
Assemblies of God	2	5	+3
Bible Mission	-	2	+2
Evangelical Brotherhood	-	1	+1
Salvation Army	-	1	+1
Jehovah Witnesses	-	1	+1
South Seas Evangelical	2	2	
Evangelical Ch. of Papua	2	-	-2
Nazarene	3	1	-1
Evangelical Ch. of	1	1	
Manus	1	1	
Pentecostal	1	1	
Apostolic	1	1	
Wesleyan	1	-	-1
Christian Brethren	1	-	-1
Evangelical	1	-	-1
Baptist			

¹⁸ Zocca (1995, 175-6) estimates that between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of religious affiliation in PNG decreased by 9.1% for the historical mainline churches, and increased 8.7% for the Evangelical, Pentecostal, SDA and other churches. The percentage change in electoral representation is over 5 years, which makes it double the rate of change in the general population. More research needs to be done to find out to what degree denominational membership, or merely the identification as "Christian," was a significant factor in people's choices.

Characteristics of the New Religious Groups

The details above on the high profile given to Christian convictions and the role of the churches in some recent events indicate that “religion” became a significant factor in the politics leading up to the 1997 Papua New Guinea elections. To a greater degree than in previous elections, Christians identified with the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches were the protagonists in campaigns to ensure that honest, “God-fearing” candidates would be elected. Also, disagreements surfaced over the combination of proselytism and military service in Bougainville, and Brigadier General Singirok got the support of a group of born again Christian officers in the military. As shown above, election results reveal a diminution of the political representation of the historical mainline Churches and an increase in the representation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Conservative Evangelical Churches such as the Assemblies of God and Christian Life Crusade. Indicators are not proof, but the trends are obvious.

What are the lessons to be learned from these developments? How can we understand them theologically? What would be a “proper” relationship between religion and politics? Such questions lead to a more particular one: How does the theology of involvement with the “world” compare among the churches, especially between the Catholic Church and the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches? The contrast may be found in many areas, but especially in the areas of: world view, sense of urgency, and power.

1. World View. The meaning of religious concepts is closely linked with the horizon of a particular world view. The modern Western world view tends to separate the natural and supernatural and to explain events by natural causes. Supernaturalistic beliefs and actions are assigned a minor role in explaining everyday experiences. Direct intervention from the heavens is generally restricted to past events, and any intervention by God today would have to be “miraculous.” This mechanistic, secular world view is generally skeptical about visions, possession, links between sin and sickness, and so forth.

Anthropologists tell us that in Melanesia, typically, one finds an integrated world view with no separation between the natural and supernatural (see, for example, Whiteman 1984: 90-91). This “integration” does not mean that the world view is “monistic.” There is a distinction

between the sacred and secular, empirical and non-empirical. However, the sacred or non-empirical is found, not in some other world, but within the context of ordinary experience. This integration affects the way people understand non-empirical phenomena. For example, sickness and misfortune are often attributed to bad relationships with fellow humans or spirit beings.

Theo Aerts has compared the Melanesian world view with that of the Scriptures. He points out that in both the Bible and in Melanesia, it is difficult to settle on one authoritative world view. Rather, there are a multitude of "partial concepts" (Aerts 1989: 38). He gives many examples where the Biblical and Melanesian partial concepts are comparable, in contrast to modern scientific insights based on scientific logic. In Melanesia, for example, the sky, the earth and the underworld are separate realms not unlike the understanding of the cosmos found in the New Testament (Mt. 11:23; Rom. 10:6-7). Though separate, there is communication between these realms. Thus in Melanesia, great importance is given to interventions from gods and spirits into daily affairs. There is a continual communication between people and the spirits.¹⁹

What is the typical world view of Melanesian Christians? The Catholic bishops, in their political awareness campaign have tried to utilize the best insights of modern Western, education with its clarity and logic (interspersed with cartoon drawings). Theirs is an attempt to influence people by appealing to their intelligence and common sense. This approach is commendable but has its limitations. Some prominent Catholic Melanesians confess an ambivalence between the traditional Melanesian world view and the modern scientific one.²⁰

¹⁹ Aerts has focused on the similarities between the Melanesian worldview and that of the Scriptures. Mantovani (1984: 49-86), points to differences between the theism of nomadic peoples and the "biocosmic" worldview of sedentary gardeners. The issue is a complex one and should not detract from the point being made here that the Melanesian worldview is closer to the world view of the Bible than is the modern scientific worldview. For a valuable contribution to the debate, see Downey 1996: 9-23.

²⁰ Bernard Narokobi says that he finds himself with a middle-of-the-road approach, trying to strike a balance between the authentic Melanesian experience and new Christian demands. See "What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?" in May 1985: 75-77.

The NRGs consciously hold to a Biblical view of the world. Thus in many ways their world view is closer to the typical Melanesian worldview than the Western scientific one. Ecstasy, speaking in tongues, divination, and the like are common in the traditional Melanesian religious experience. With the NRGs, one finds similar religious phenomena. God's intervention is expected as a normal consequence of prayer. In the Pentecostal churches one finds powerful preaching, demonstrations of spiritual power in confrontations between the power of God and evil, and practices based on belief in the link between sickness and sin.

Franco Zocca, investigating the growth of NRGs in Papua New Guinea, says that millennial expectations also fit with the traditional Melanesian world view. Zocca points out how mainline churches usually downplay the millennial dimension of the search for salvation in favour of human progress and development. Instead, many of the NRGs emphasize the Second Advent of Christ. Moreover, when people in Melanesia face massive social changes, they look for an answer from their own traditional world view rather than simply giving in to foreign ideologies. Thus, in our times, some people are leaving the mainline churches to join the NRGs because the latter are more consonant with traditional Melanesian beliefs and practices (Zocca 1995: 174-187).²¹

There is some truth to Zocca's argument. However, there are some unexplained features of the NRGs. For example, if they are so consonant with traditional Melanesian ways, then why do they break up communities, preach against cultural symbols and ban traditional festivities? The "cultural" factor could be a partial explanation for the success of the NRGs, however, as I will argue, we need also to consider "religious" factors like the effects of secularization and the importance of popular religiosity.

2. Urgency and emotional appeal. In Papua New Guinea today one often hears reference to the year 2000. Catholics normally link the term with the "Jubilee" year. Many other people associate the year 2000 with dramatic changes in the world. In more isolated areas of Papua New Guinea people connect the year 2000 with the end of the world. There are many different views, but the general opinion in the NRGs is that the present state of world events corresponds to prophetic signs for the imminent Second Coming of Christ.

²¹ Zocca bases his argument on findings of the English sociologist Brian Wilson (1973).

The Christian Revival Crusade, (CRC) which has a membership of some 6,000 people in Port Moresby, and 38,000 nationally, including some of the political elite, teaches that Christ's return will be associated with world-wide upheaval, and will be preceded by a period of great tribulation across the whole earth. The second Advent will signal the beginning of the "rapture." The dead in Christ will rise, but those who died outside of Christ will all remain in the darkness of death until the thousand years of Christ's millennial kingdom are ended. During Christ's reign of 1,000 years, Satan will be banished and there will be no sickness, warfare, poverty or injustice. There will be only a perfect government of Christ and his church through a purified and powerful Israel. Humankind will rise to new heights of spiritual, intellectual and physical perfection (Chant 1967).

Beliefs such as those of the CRC give a real sense of urgency to the present time. It motivates Christians to use every means to spread the gospel so that others too may repent and be saved. It also gives an added urgency to finding God-fearing politicians. In the Highlands (Enga) some people were talking about the importance of electing the right politicians, because they would be leading them into the "last days" of the year 2000!

The end-time imagery coupled with forceful charismatic prayer and highly emotional singing of the NRGs make a powerful impression. Main-line church services appear quite dull in comparison. One must look to the popular devotions of the Catholic church to find a similar sense of fervor. At the end of the election period, an internationally famous statue of Our Lady of Fatima was brought to Papua New Guinea. Stories circulated of miraculous powers connected with the statue. During the two-week pilgrimage around several dioceses, many Catholic parishes witnessed an unprecedented amount of activity with processions and all-night prayer vigils. From a phenomenological point of view, it appears that accounts of the miraculous and a message like the Fatima one, with its summons to repentance lest terrible events befall the human race, appeal to peoples' religiosity. Whether it be the Second Coming of Christ or the apocalyptic message of Fatima, the vivid end-time imagery is able to capture peoples' imagination and arouse them to a heightened sense of religious fervor.

3. Power. Esau Tuza, in his paper "Spirits and Powers in Melanesia" tells how the concept of *mana* is central to Melanesian religion. *Mana* is not simply physical strength, but rather, "it is a force that saves" (Tuza 1979: 102).

Mana can be determined by a person's own skills, it can be given from the spirits, or it can be gained through participation in ritual. However attained, *mana* and the issue of power were and are key issues in the lives of Melanesian people.

With the NRGs, power is experienced particularly in the realm of "spiritual warfare." In his book, *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian*, Sherman Dean (1990) begins with the account of an experience in Port Moresby. He had been in Port Moresby for three months with a Youth with a Mission (YWAM) team witnessing in the market places. There were few "results." So he fasted and prayed and heard God telling him that there were "forces of darkness" holding the city and that these had never been challenged. He felt that the only way to overcome these forces was to praise God, which he did, and soon they saw a difference. "Instead of hardened, unrepentant people hiding behind a Christianized façade, we saw individuals stand weeping publicly, renouncing their witchcraft." Through this experience and the experience of one of their group getting cerebral malaria, which he attributes to the forces of darkness, he realized that "we are all called to be warriors, and we must all learn how to fight" (Dean 1990: 17).

The literature and preaching on spiritual warfare uses striking images of the battle between good and evil. A major problem is said to be "Godless leadership" which "allows rulers of the unseen world to rule" (:89). Satan has infiltrated the existing structures of society, from the parliament right down to churches and sports teams. There are also "territorial spirits." These are powers of darkness assigned to specific areas and specific peoples. They are demonic spirits which can attach themselves to people, or seats of government. Sometimes evangelists refer to their ministry of deliverance as "binding the strongman" (Mk. 3:27).²² The previously mentioned defence force mission to break the power of Satan over Bougainville, is an example of this way of thinking.

A striking example of the war against territorial spirits comes from the Solomon Islands. In 1981, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Sir Peter Kenilorea, hired a plane so that Dr. Gil McArthur of the South Seas Evangelical Church could fly above Honiara and pray over the town in order to release the city from the power of Satan.²³

²² On radio shows I have heard Moresby Four Square Church pastor Bill Page talking at length on the subject of territorial spirits. For further views, see Wagner 1991.

²³ Personal communication, William Longgar, Melanesian Institute, Goroka.

A similar idea lies behind Operation Brukim Skru. Christian leaders felt that with so many reports of corruption and mismanagement of the country's resources, the Papua New Guinea government had come under the control of Satan and that in order to get a "God-fearing" government they had to engage in spiritual warfare during the election process. This involved intercessory prayer in the different churches and "prayer cover" at the polling sites themselves. To remind people to pray at the polling sites Life Outreach Ministries printed 100,000 "Pray before you Vote" posters for distribution around the country.

This approach to power contrasts with the approach of the mainline churches, which prefer to appeal to people's conscience rather than battle directly against Satan or territorial spirits (for example, the Catholic bishops' political awareness campaign). The mainline churches point out how Jesus was wary about using miraculous signs of power and how, in Lk. 10:19-20, Jesus promised the Seventy that they would be given authority to perform numerous acts of power, but he qualified this saying, that they should not rejoice that the spirits are subject to them.

Melanesian people, however, expect "spiritual" people to show some evidence of their power. People joining the NRGs often say that now they know that the gospel has power (Richardson 1986: 71). Wayne Dye (1984: 158-180) of SIL argues that any Melanesian theology must take the question of power seriously. In so doing we will be faithful to the New Testament and relevant to the felt needs of Melanesians. Lutheran Gary Teske (1983: 247) points out how people in Papua New Guinea tend to use an "effective power criterion" to decide on the value of a particular Church or method of worship.²⁴ They are impressed by forms of worship that produce experiential effects in those who participate.

One sees a difference here between the approach of the mainline churches and that of the NRGs.²⁵ The latter recognize evil personified in malign forces, and the other sees evil not on the outside, but inside, in its effects on the human mind and soul. For one, the solution is spiritual

²⁴ Teske (1983: 248) writes: "I fear that the cultural adaptations made in the worship of the mainline churches are little more than cosmetic daubs of paint and in reality it still requires a person with a knowledge of 16th century theology and church history to appreciate what is going on."

²⁵ It is unclear just how mainline members of the charismatic movement fit into the contrast between the mainline churches and the NRGs.

warfare; for the other, the answer is sought in trying to inform people's conscience and influence their values. One takes an interventionist military model, the other an ethical, educational model of righting the wrong. The approach of the NRGs is very attractive to people in Melanesia because it concerns not just the power to find "heaven," but the power to foresee approaching troubles, avert misfortunes, heal illness, and discover ways to prosperity.

Involvement in the "World"

In its attempt to maintain a separation of faith and worldly realities such as politics, the Catholic Church usually ends up siding with one or the other. Either the socio-political dimension is stressed, risking the loss of the transcendent, or the spiritual dimension is stressed in a way that the church ends up being irrelevant to human existence. This is a theological problem of considerable consequence. In practical terms it leads to fundamental questions like: What does it mean to be a Christian? How do we know that God is active in our world today?

Liberation theology is a recent attempt to try to integrate salvation and human effort. Liberation theology treats salvation as an intra-historical reality so that there is one history of salvation at the heart of human history (Gutierrez 1988: 86). God is found in human history, not as intervening from the divine into a profane world, but in terms of the revelation of God's love as an integral part of historical events. "The political is grafted onto the eternal" so that liberating praxis possesses a transcendent purpose (:34).²⁶ The fierce debate over liberation theology is indicative of the variety of opinions within the Catholic Church.²⁷

The conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are generally united in opposing liberation theology. They link it to forms of religious or

²⁶ Gutierrez (1988, 139) writes, "In human love there is a depth which the human mind does not suspect ... This humanness—in the light of the Gospel—reveals God."

²⁷ Some would prefer the "two-planes" imagery common in many church documents. For example, "The whole of human history is permeated with an arduous struggle against the powers of darkness which started at the world's beginning and will continue to the last day, as the Lord tells us. Finding ourselves in this conflict, we have continually to fight to ally ourselves with good, and only with great effort and the help of God's grace can we achieve unity within ourselves," (Gutierrez 1988).

political liberalism which are seen as running contrary to God's plan. The conservative groups tend to view the world in dualistic terms: good and evil, heaven and earth, grace and nature. They see the world as evil and wicked in contrast to "the heavenlies." In all of this dualism, there is continual reference not just to one realm or the other, but to the contrast between the two. In the past this opposition led these Christians to steer clear of the sinful world and to keep aloof from politics.

Recently in Papua New Guinea there has been a significant change. Christians have realized that they have to be part of the answer to their prayers. This means that they have to get involved in social and political realities. They cannot simply pray and wait for God to intervene. *They* have to cast out devils in *his* name. This development does not mean that they have become secularized. They see the struggle in terms of heaven and earth, and their battle is still with Satan, rather than people. They believe ardently that God's kingdom is advanced by God and through God's response to their prayers. But now they also stress the importance of people's Spirit-led actions. Dean Sherman writes, "We are called to rise up and repair the damage in the walls of society through warfare, prayer, and involvement" (Dean 1990: 92). Their move towards involvement is not unlike the stress on "commitment" in liberation theology. The involvement becomes more effective when it is found in combination with an urgent message and manifestations of power. One sees evidence of this in the involvement of the NRGs in Papua New Guinea politics today.

The evangelical involvement is attractive and effective when combined with the urgency of the message and signs of power. That is the advantage of the NRGs at the moment: urgency, power, and now involvement. By comparison, the Catholic Church is well known for its involvement in human development and justice issues. However the message is usually presented in a way that appeals to conscience and consciousness, rather than to emotions and the (miraculous) imagination as with many NRGs. Only with the devotions of "popular" Catholicism does one find comparable forms that people find attractive.²⁸ Sri Lankan scholar Aloysius Pieris (1996: 156-158) likes to point out how it is in "cosmic" religiosity: the sacred, the womanly, the earthly, where common people discover a liberating spirituality. The challenge is to present a genuine message of salvation that goes beyond the simply miraculous and relates to people's daily human concerns.

²⁸ Perhaps the Catholic church should make more frequent mention of the Archangel Michael, patron of Papua New Guinea.

A Constantinian Shift

While there have been achievements, there are dangers too in this recent involvement in Papua New Guinea politics. Christians in Papua New Guinea need to beware lest they adopt an unhealthy “Christendom” mentality. Spiritual power, for all its great value, is potentially dangerous when coupled with political power. When Bill Skate, now Prime Minister, declared during his campaign, “I am going to lead these seventeen men with the power of Jesus Christ,” there is evidence of a “Constantinian Shift” whereby spiritual and political power become inextricably intertwined (*The Independent* 11 April 1997, 7).²⁹ The combination is potentially more dangerous when the religious power has fundamentalist tendencies. How long will freedom of religion be tolerated?

The practice of legitimizing political ambition with claims to be appointed by God is an unhealthy trend, with the potential for all sorts of abuses.³⁰ Not only can it sacralize power to a dangerous extent, but it can also shift responsibility away from the person responsible (“...it is God’s plan...”). When, at the combined service after the elections, the Prime Minister declared that “God is the real Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea,” he was making a confessional statement. But when does this become a dangerous passing on of a responsibility that must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the elected leaders? Culturally, politics and religion work together in Melanesia, but in contemporary Papua New Guinea the stakes are so high that people may need to learn from the bitter experience in other parts of the world that authentic faith and politics must preserve a certain autonomy. At the moment there appears to be a common opinion that it is best to have devout Christians leading the country. This too could be challenged. While being “born again” may be an indication of moral integrity, it is no guarantee of intelligence, wisdom or good management, all of which are very important qualities for national leaders today.

²⁹ I refer to the transformation that occurred when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire.

³⁰ Such claims were quite common during the recent election campaign. In this context, I would question the recent press statement by the Governor General, “People who are challenging Christians are challenging God” (*Post Courier* 18 September 1997, p.13).

Implications

There are a number of implications arising from this examination of politics and NRGs in Papua New Guinea. Four implications that I wish to highlight are: going beyond the miraculous, finding a healthy relationship between faith and politics, developing a genuine Melanesian Christian spirituality, and the place for the sacred in popular religiosity.

I think all Christians need to look again at 1 Cor. 1:22-23: The NRGs look for miracles, but equally the mainline churches are preoccupied with the wisdom of their theology (see Teske 1983: 248). There is a tendency in Papua Guinea to look for God's action in the miraculous and the extraordinary. We need to show how God can be present even in the midst of suffering and death. This will be shown in the church's involvement for integral human development and concern for those who suffer ill health or who are down-trodden. The New Testament and the history of the Church should remind us that the Spirit is more often present and active in many ordinary ways: leading, inspiring, renewing, and encouraging. It would be good to devote more attention to the constant work and presence of God's Spirit in our midst. This may result in innovative and courageous responses to evil in our society today.

I have pointed out the danger of political-religious messianism. We should not forget that Jesus died at the hands of the political authorities. In many ways the kingdom of God contradicts the powers of this world. In service of that kingdom, the Church, inspired by Jesus' saving message, must be a critical liberating force in society. The spiritual rebirth of individuals is not sufficient. Our entire society must be "born again" if we are to eliminate the injustice and exploitation prevalent in present political behaviour. So far we have heard little of consequence that could be considered truly prophetic. The mainline churches, including the Catholic Church have a long tradition of social commitment which could contribute a lot at this point. A healthy relationship between faith and politics is not fostered by fundamentalist dualism. Rather, by its prophetic dimension, faith will relativize the political realm in the light of the kingdom of God.

The mainline churches should ask what they can learn from the NRGs in order to develop a genuine Melanesian Christian spirituality. Perhaps the religious movements are reminding us that early Christianity was markedly millennial. Could it be that Melanesian people are uncovering this aspect of Christianity which has been hidden by our modern scientific world view (see Guiart 1962; Eliade 1965)? The Catholic Church is well

known as one that 1965)? The Catholic Church is well known as one that provides “services” to the people in co-operation with the government. Now it is expending a great deal of energy in a conflict with the government over funding for health services. Does the missionary church need to take a different direction from the church of the missions? Could the main-line churches do more to clearly present Christ as God’s answer to the existential needs of people: as healer, as fulfiller of their ideas and values? People want to see the power of God’s spirit at work. Once they see this there is often a new release of creativity, as is evident in the growth of these movements today.

The most intriguing question concerns the “world” that we are involved in. Most often, in Catholic theology, the sacred and secular are kept separate, and members of the ministerial priesthood are told to keep out of politics. Catholic missionaries are agents of secularization. They presume a Western scientific world view that relegates the miraculous and the magical to the periphery. I think that the success of the NRGs is due partially at least to the way they try to Christianize without secularizing. The miraculous, sacred power, and struggles with the demonic, are not relegated to the fringes of their world. They are prepared to interact with the sacred in Melanesia—an interaction which all too often is a confrontation. Catholic theologians and missiologists would do well to put aside their Western glasses for a while in order see the spectacle of popular religiosity, not simply as a battleground, but where the traditional world and the Christian message of a liberating God converge.

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