

# Papua New Guinea

<b>POPULATION</b>	7,059,653
<b>CHRISTIAN</b>	94.8 percent
<b>ETHNORELIGIONIST</b>	3.4 percent
<b>BAHÁ'Í</b>	0.9 percent
<b>BUDDHIST</b>	0.2 percent
<b>OTHER</b>	0.2 percent
<b>NONAFFILIATED</b>	0.5 percent



## Country Overview

**INTRODUCTION** A predominantly Christian nation, Papua New Guinea comprises a number of islands in the western Pacific Ocean. The majority of the country's territory lies on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, located just north of Australia. The western half of New Guinea is occupied by two Indonesian provinces. Papua New Guinea's island region includes the Bismarck Archipelago, a cluster of islands situated off the northeastern coast of New Guinea. This region includes the island provinces of New Britain and New Ireland. East of

the archipelago is Bougainville Island, which, along with several other islands, forms the autonomous region of Bougainville. Papua New Guinea has a total land area of 174,850 square miles (452,860 square kilometers), with varying geography that includes low-lying coral atolls, volcanic islands, tropical forests, and mountain grasslands. The country's highest peak, Mount Wilhelm, rises 14,793 feet (4,509 meters). Papua New Guinea has more than 60 volcanoes, a number of which are active and periodically require the evacuation of nearby areas.

Papua New Guinea—along with the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji—is part of a cluster of Pacific islands called Melanesia. Natives of this region are often referred to as Melanesians. According to archaeological records, the region that is now Papua New Guinea has been inhabited for more than 40,000 years. There have been various migrations to the area from Southeast Asia, resulting in a cultural complexity evidenced in the more than 800 languages spoken in the country. Spanish and Portuguese explorers first arrived in Papua New Guinea in the 16th century, becoming the first known Europeans to investigate the region, but it was not until 1847 that European missionaries began introducing Christianity to the islands' native people. In 1885 Germany formally annexed the northern coast of the main island, then called New Guinea, while Britain colonized the south, referred to then as Papua. Over the course of the 20th century, as the territory was transferred from British to Australian control and finally granted independence in 1975, nearly the entire population of Papua New Guinea converted to Christianity.

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

An overwhelming majority of Papua New Guineans identify as Christian. However, indigenous religions, based on veneration of ancestors and rituals to maintain relationships with life-giving powers, continue to be practiced and form an underlying stratum for the faith of many Christians, particularly among older generations. Followers of other major world religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, are also present in small numbers.

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** While the preamble to the constitution of Papua New Guinea pledges the country to follow Christian principles, a specific section of the constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, thought, and religion. In recent years, some have sought to make Christianity the official religion of the country, thereby limiting the activities of other religious groups. However, the country's principal Christian churches have opposed such moves in favor of continued religious freedom.

Although Papua New Guinea's population is overwhelmingly Christian, relations between the country's various Christian groups have not always been characterized by tolerance. Following its colonization of New Guinea, the German government implemented a "spheres of influence" policy, confining the various Christian mission societies to separate areas of the territory. The British government instituted a similar policy for Methodist missionaries and the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Papua. Although the Wesleyan and LMS leaders accepted these policies, the Catholic bishops did not, and their implementation helped produce in Papua New Guinea the same types of long-lasting divisions and animosities that plagued Europe after the Protestant Reformation.

Religious tolerance among the country's Christian churches improved considerably in the 1970s. This was largely a result of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, a council of the Roman Catholic Church that lasted from 1962 to 1965 and attempted to reconcile Catholicism's place in modern society. Nevertheless, tensions still exist between the country's various denominations. For example, some Christian groups with more fundamentalist orientations have denied that those from mainline denominations (Catholic, Lutheran, United, and Anglican) are actually Christian by definition. Catholics have been accused of magical practices, while other mainline denominations have been criticized for using historical-critical methods of studying the Bible rather than taking a literal interpretation. In the early

21st century, some new Christian movements and Pentecostal churches, bolstered by the lively music of their services and wonders associated with their beliefs, have grown at the expense of the country's older and more established denominations.

## Major Religion

### CHRISTIANITY

**DATE OF ORIGIN** 1847

**NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS** 6.7 million

**HISTORY** Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Catholic and Protestant missionaries of different nationalities introduced Christianity to various parts of what is now Papua New Guinea. The first Catholic missionaries arrived on Woodlark Island, off the eastern coast of New Guinea, in 1847. However, the effects of malaria on the missionaries and influenza on the indigenous soon brought an end to the project. In 1871 missionaries from the nondenominational London Missionary Society came to the southern coast of Papua. Shortly after, Catholic missionary efforts began again, with German and French members of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart arriving in New Britain in 1882 and in Papua in 1884. In 1896 Catholic missionaries from the Society of the Divine Word arrived along the northern coast of New Guinea. Five years later, in 1901, French missionaries from the Society of Mary (Marists), a Roman Catholic institute, began to evangelize on the island of Bougainville. Meanwhile, Protestant missionaries had also begun traveling to the region. In 1875 Wesleyan Methodists came to the Duke of York Islands, a group of islands located near New Britain in the Bismarck Archipelago. Lutherans arrived in the towns of Finschafen in 1886 and Madang in 1887, while Anglicans landed at Dogura Bay on the northern coast in 1891. Australian Seventh-day Adventists came to Papua in 1908, and in 1914 Germans from the Liebenzeller Mission, an evangelical organization, began proselytizing in the Admiralty Islands, a group of 18 islands along the northernmost portion of the Bismarck Archipelago.

American and Australian servicemen returning home from the Pacific campaigns of World War II (1939–45) were instrumental in stimulating Western interest in Papua New Guinea, which was then considered one of

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

the world's last unexplored areas and home to many potential Christian converts. Following the war, many other denominations and interdenominational missionary groups began to arrive in the country. These included the South Seas Evangelical Mission, the Christian Brotherhood, the Church of the Nazarene, the Apostolic Church, and the New Tribes Mission. Prominent among the third wave of Pentecostal-type missions were the Foursquare Gospel Church, the Christian Revival Crusade, and the Sweden-based Philadelphia Church. Starting around the mid-20th century, many Christian churches in Papua New Guinea began to move away from choosing foreign missionaries as their leaders, choosing instead to appoint natives to those positions. This localization of leadership is a significant reason why Christianity has become an accepted part of everyday life in the country.

In the 1970s, following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic, Lutheran, Wesleyan/United, and Anglican churches began a number of joint ventures. These included the establishment of the Melanesian Institute, which conducts social and cultural research in the region, and the founding of Wantok Publications, publisher of a weekly newspaper written in Tok Pisin, the country's lingua franca (working language). In 1995 Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) visited Papua New Guinea, resulting in renewed religious fervor among Catholics and some tension with other Christian denominations. In the 1990s the country also saw zealous crusades by American evangelists, such as Benny Hinn (1952–) and Creflo Dollar (1962–). As a result, many in Papua New Guinea adopted the belief that the world would end at the turn of the millennium. By the early 21st century, the country's mainline churches were looking for ways to respond to increasing social problems, while smaller churches were developing nondenominational and interdenominational ministries, some of which attract new parishioners with theologies of prosperity and claims of miraculous healing. Meanwhile, followers of non-Christian religions have begun to arrive in Papua New Guinea, mainly from China and other Asian countries. These immigrants, many of them employed in the country's mining, gas, and oil operations, have thus far tended to practice their religions quietly and away from the public eye.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** Some of the first Christian missionaries to arrive in Papua New Guinea, such as Johann Flierl (1858–1947) and Christian Keysser (1877–1961), are still remembered among

Papua New Guineans. Flierl is considered the father of the Lutheran mission in Papua New Guinea, and Keysser, who was instrumental in publishing a dictionary of the indigenous Kâte language in 1925, was known for his deep respect for the country's indigenous culture.

Bishop Louis Vangeke (1904–1982), the son of a well-known traditional healer, was the first native Papua New Guinean to become a Roman Catholic priest. When Vangeke returned to Papua New Guinea in 1937 after completing his studies in Madagascar, his presence challenged the authority of the region's colonial rulers, whose strict regime forbade native men to drink alcohol, wear shirts, or be in Port Moresby, the country's capital, after dark—all of which were required of Vangeke as a Catholic priest.

Reverend Sione Kami (d. 1999), a Tongan Methodist who settled in Papua New Guinea, was instrumental in bringing together church leaders and fostering ecumenical cooperation. Other well-known past Christian leaders include Anglican Archbishop George Ambo (1922–2008), Anglican Bishop David Hand (1918–2006), Lutheran Bishop Wesley Kigasung (1950–2008), and Catholic Archbishop Peter Korunku. Retired leaders include Brian James Barnes (1933–), former Catholic archbishop of Port Moresby, and Samson Lowa, former moderator of the United Church of Papua New Guinea.

Since the start of the new millennium, with the rapid advance of Western culture and the secular influences accessed through modern media, the country's churches have lost some of their former influence. How the churches will respond to these changes is yet to be seen but will depend largely on their leadership. Contemporary leaders from the major churches in Papua New Guinea include Archbishop John Ribat (Catholic), Reverend Giegere Wenge (Evangelical Lutheran), Moderator Reverend Bernard Siai (United Church), Senior Bishop Allan Migi (Anglican), Colonel Neil Webb (Salvation Army), President Patrick Gaiyer (Baptist), and Pastor Leigh Rice (Seventh-day Adventist). Prominent leaders and evangelists from the country's Pentecostal churches include Senior Pastor Joseph Walters of the Assemblies of God and Principal Pastor Godfrey Wippon of Revival Centres of Papua New Guinea. Many of these leaders are active in international bodies as well.

Christian denominations in Papua New Guinea fall into the following three groups: the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, which includes the Anglican, Lutheran, Union Baptist, and Roman Catholic

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

denominations; the Evangelical Alliance; and the National Council of Pentecostal Churches. These three bodies are meant to represent the country's churches at the national and international level, yet in reality they have had little impact, a sign of the churches' diminishing influence in the 21st century. In 2013, for example, the government of Papua New Guinea reinstated the death penalty. Although the Catholic Church strongly opposes this decision, the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches—nor the other two bodies—have made a public statement about it.

**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** As Papua New Guinea has transitioned from an oral to a written tradition, a growing body of writing from native authors has emerged. None of these writers, however, qualifies as a major theologian. Philosopher and politician Bernard Narokobi (c. 1937–2010) is well known for his reflections on Melanesian customs, history, and identity. He wrote about these topics in *The Melanesian Way* (1980), a book that blends elements of the traditional Melanesian worldview with the Christian faith. Likewise, former United Church Bishop Simeon Namunu (d. 2002) wrote as a Christian about the indigenous belief in deities and spirits. Former government minister Anthony Siaguru was often explicitly Christian in his published political commentaries, frequently addressing corruption and the need for transparency. Paulias Matane (1931–) is a prolific writer who often deals with secular themes from a Christian viewpoint. Matane has published more than 20 books, including *Exploring the Holy Lands* (2002).

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** Christians in Papua New Guinea have varying holy places depending on their religious denomination and the region in which they live. One of the best-known houses of worship is the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul in the Milne Bay Province. Built in the 1930s, the 170-foot-long building survived the Japanese occupation of World War II.

The village of Rakunai in East New Britain is the resting place of Blessed Peter To Rot (1912–1945), the first Papua New Guinean to be beatified by the Catholic Church. The chapel there and surrounding springs have become a focus for groups of pilgrims. There is also a popular pilgrimage each year to Maria Helpim at Guyaba, a village near the town of Madang, where church personnel hid from Japanese troops during World War II.

### Bernard Mullu Narokobi

Bernard Narokobi (c. 1937–2010) was one of the Pacific's most influential thinkers, writers, and activists, whose ideas helped shape and motivate indigenous movements for decolonization. Described by the *Guardian* newspaper in 2009 as one of Papua New Guinea's "living national icons," Narokobi bore many titles during his lifetime. He was a lawyer, a writer, a poet, a philosopher, an academic, a judge, a human rights activist, a diplomat, a politician, and a Catholic layman. He wrote poems and several novels and published a number of articles on such topics as traditional customs and concepts, religion, leadership, and law and government. Throughout his life, Narokobi tried to strike a balance between the Christian faith and the authentic Melanesian experience.

In his book *The Melanesian Way* (1980), Narokobi discouraged Papua New Guineans from forming an identity based solely on the country's colonialization and Christianization, encouraging them to look also toward their homeland's ancient and rich values. Describing it as "a total cosmic vision of life," the Melanesian worldview according to Narokobi is "not intended to be syllogistically logical or consistent; it is meant to be reflective of human life which is experience filled with inconsistencies, contradictions, emotions, reason, and intellect."

Other holy places are associated with the arrival of early missionaries. These include Yule Island on the southern coast, where there is a memorial chapel to commemorate the arrival of the first Sacred Heart missionaries; Simbang near Finschhafen, the site of the first Lutheran mission station; and Kaieta Beach near Dogura Bay, where the first Anglican missionaries landed. At Dogura there is a *modawa* tree—a symbol of survival—that sprouted from the timber of a corner post of the Anglican mission's original house. A more contemporary memorial church is the Reverend Sione Kami United Church building in Port Moresby, named after a well-known Tongan missionary.

**WHAT IS SACRED** The traditional Melanesian religious worldview, with its integration of the sacred and

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

secular, influences Papua New Guinean Christians in their perception of the sacred today. Papua New Guineans do not adhere to a strict separation of church and state. For example, priests and pastors are occasionally elected to parliament, and at one time Bernard Narokobi, then speaker of the house, placed a cross on the roof of the House of Assembly. (It was later removed by his successor.)

Cemeteries, bones, and other remains of the dead are treated with a combination of reverence and fear, as indigenous beliefs hold that spirits of the dead are still associated with their remains and could thus become malicious and bring harm to the living. These beliefs have led some Papua New Guineans to attempt to retrieve the bones of ancestors held in museums overseas. Many Christians in the country maintain the totemic beliefs of indigenous religions, refusing to kill or eat animals with which they have a spiritual connection.

Christians consider the Bible to be sacred as the Word of God, and Bible translation is important in Papua New Guinea, where the New Testament has been translated into more than 225 local languages. Fundamentalist Christians in the country take a literalist approach to the Bible, applying both biblical prophecy and traditional millenarian (apocalyptic) thinking to contemporary events. Other denominations take a less literal approach. Many Catholics, for example, give a place of respect to the Bible alongside statues and other devotional practices, most of them imported from outside the country.

**HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS** Papua New Guinea follows a Western Christian calendar, with major holidays at Christmas and Easter. Of the 11 official public holidays, six are associated with those two celebrations. The other five public holidays are New Year's, Queen's Birthday, Remembrance Day, Independence Day, and Day of Repentance. The National Day of Repentance was started in 2012 by a lobby of Christian Zionists who do not represent the majority Christian views of the people of Papua New Guinea. The mainline churches in the country do not commemorate the day, and it is unclear whether it will continue.

Sporting and cultural events, such as rugby games and shows celebrating the country's independence, are sometimes associated with holidays in Papua New Guinea. Aside from church services, there are few public religious celebrations, although people do participate in public processions when the opportunity arises. In towns

such as Port Moresby and Lae, for example, increasingly large crowds carry a cross through the streets on Good Friday.

**MODE OF DRESS** Dress in Papua New Guinea varies according to the altitude and weather, the demands of work, and whether the environment is urban or rural. Much of the clothing worn is second hand stock imported from Australia and other nearby countries.

Traditional costume for women in Papua New Guinea usually reveals bare breasts, while for men, particularly in the Western Province, traditional attire may be merely a small shell or sheath on the end of the penis. Churches differ in their approval of this attire, with some considering it obscene and others encouraging its use on special occasions, including formal worship services. Women commonly wear a *meri* blouse, which is a long tunic that was originally introduced by missionaries.

Most members of Catholic and Anglican religious orders, particularly women, have a special religious garb, or habit, similar to those worn by members of religious congregations in Western countries. Ministers of certain churches, such as the Lutherans, wear a type of clerical collar on formal occasions. Many male pastors in the United Church replace trousers with a wrap-around cloth called a *sulu*, while more conservative Christian churches encourage a white shirt and tie for men and long skirts for women.

**DIETARY PRACTICES** Dietary practices in Papua New Guinea depend more on the regional availability of food than on religious beliefs. Some Christians follow indigenous cultural taboos prohibiting the consumption of birds, fish, and other animals with which their tribe or family has a totemic relationship.

Some Christian churches forbid or strongly discourage the use of alcohol and tobacco. Chewing betel nut, which contains stimulants, may also be prohibited. Seventh-day Adventists forbid eating pork products, which has added significance considering the important place given to pigs in Papua New Guinean culture. Pigs traditionally represent wealth and prestige, as a man with many pigs is seen as having the ability to pay a bride-price for many wives and compensate for death or other injuries, thus making him a man of status.

Although Catholics are universally required to fast during the Lenten season and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of the season, few people in Papua New Guinea adhere strictly to those requirements.

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

**RITUALS** Traditional rituals in Papua New Guinea are often associated with life stages. A first birthday celebration, for example, may involve rites and payments to the mother (and her people) for her loss of blood during childbirth. The father's family often gives payments throughout the life of the child to make it understood that he or she is a part of the father's clan.

Other rituals include marriage, where bride-price is customarily given, and mourning ceremonies for the dead. Many of these rituals have changed in the contemporary era, reflecting the joint influence of Christianity and indigenous beliefs. For example, a Christian baptism might be combined with traditional rituals designed to strengthen the child and purify the woman after childbirth.

In most cases, weddings and funerals in Papua New Guinea involve little Christian influence and continue to follow traditional indigenous custom. Every member of an extended family or community is expected



*A mother holds her baby while the child is being baptized by a Catholic priest in Kiunga, Papua New Guinea. © FRIEDRICH STARK/ALAMY.*

to participate in these events, which can place a heavy burden on those living and working in distant places.

Christian rituals in Papua New Guinea often retain a Western aspect. Some Pentecostal pastors stress the Bible and preaching in conducting services, copying the manner of televangelists. Priests and pastors in sacrament-oriented churches tend to follow universal practices in their worship services, with translation into a local language being the major concession to the surrounding culture. There have been some attempts on the part of the churches to integrate the indigenous culture with the Christian faith—in reconciliation ceremonies between tribes that have been at war, for example—but such efforts are more the exception than the rule.

**RITES OF PASSAGE** Some churches in Papua New Guinea discourage indigenous initiation rites for men, such as scarification, encouraging them to instead adopt Christian rites of passage, such as baptism, confirmation, and First Communion. Traditionally, the most significant initiation rite for young women was marriage. While this is still true, few couples in the country choose to enter into a formal Christian marriage.

In the early 21st century, some churches in Papua New Guinea, including the Catholic Church, have begun to reinstate traditional indigenous initiation rites, such as extended stays in the forest for purification. For the most part, these attempts have been well received, but their implementation has been limited to one-off occasions, with no lasting traditions established so far.

The rituals associated with death in Papua New Guinea indicate that the Christian faith has had little influence on funerary practices in the country. All relatives, including those living far away, are expected to attend funerals. Funerary rites are perceived as initiation into a new life with a different role in the community. Spirits of the dead are considered the “living dead,” who maintain relationships with family members despite not being physically present. The spirit of the dead person must always be buried with the body. Thus, if a person dies away from home, relatives believe they must retrieve the body of the deceased, as the spirit cannot be reclaimed without it.

**MEMBERSHIP** People in Papua New Guinea typically become members of a Christian community through baptism, either as adults or children. Some churches emphasize a moment of conversion involving a personal commitment to Christ, with baptism serving only as a

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

sign of their previous commitment. Baptism in Papua New Guinea occasionally takes the form of a public event performed in a dammed stream.

Christian churches actively seek to grow through traditional missionary activities, such as proclamation and social work. In the early 21st century, evangelical preachers have made renewed efforts at church “planting,” or the establishment of churches in new communities, and ministry to “backsliders,” people who have ceased to participate in church activities, perhaps because of drug or alcohol abuse. Rallies and religious conventions are common during holidays, especially Christmas, when young people return from boarding school to visit their families. Churches often use education to attract new adherents, particularly youth, by operating schools or by offering to pay tuition fees for students attending schools run by the government.

Certain churches in Papua New Guinea use television to advertise their platforms, airing programs on the country’s two public television channels. Papua New Guinea also has a number of church-run radio stations, such as Radio Light, sponsored by the country’s evangelical churches, and Radio Maria, supported by the Catholic Church. Many churches also have begun to venture into modern media, launching Web sites and blogs. However, the use of this medium is only in its initial stages, as few people in the country have access to a computer or the Internet.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** Poverty or a general lack of well-being has been traditionally perceived in Papua New Guinea as a consequence of a poor relationship with spiritual forces. This view has persisted into modern times, reinforced by foreign evangelists who promote a theology of “prosperity,” which holds that wealth and good fortune are a sign of God’s blessing. Nevertheless, a growing number of people in the country are coming to realize that poverty is more often the consequence of corruption and mismanagement. In 2011 Papua New Guinea was ranked 153 out of 183 countries on the Human Development Index, a measure of average life expectancy, income, and education levels around the world.

The country’s mainline churches offer formal social services, make statements about injustice independently or through the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, and sometimes discuss social justice issues through the *Wantok* newspaper, which they own. The Salvation Army has also taken on a principal role in confronting social

issues, while other churches operate medical and social services in urban settlements.

Christian churches in Papua New Guinea have also begun confronting issues like bribery and corruption, domestic violence, global warming, alcoholism, gambling, and the spread of HIV. The primary avenues through which they have addressed these topics include statements in newspapers, interviews on television, awareness courses, and advocacy campaigns.

The torture and murder of people, usually women, accused of witchcraft has become a major social justice issue in recent times. The concepts of witchcraft and sorcery are hardwired into most indigenous cultures of Papua New Guinea, and in recent years charges of black magic have taken on modern forms. For example, a person might be accused of using witchcraft to cause a car accident or to inflict another person with HIV. In recent years the country’s churches have begun lobbying the government to repeal the Sorcery Act, which allows for lesser penalties for those who commit violence against people accused of witchcraft or sorcery. The act was repealed in 2013, so now anyone who kills a person accused of witchcraft can be charged with willful murder.

Churches in Papua New Guinea have also become increasingly vocal about the effects of global warming, which has already begun to erode the country’s coastline. This, in turn, has forced some people to migrate from coastal areas to higher ground, a significant concern in a country where there exists a close connection between a tribe and its land. Those who migrate elsewhere are left displaced and vulnerable, and in response the Catholic Church has begun to allocate land for refugees from low-lying islands.

Another recurrent social justice issue in the country is the plight of border crossers from the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), an organization advocating the establishment of an independent state in the province of Papua. The organization is outlawed in Indonesia, and its members are pursued by Indonesian troops, leading some OPM supporters to seek refugee status in Papua New Guinea. The acceptance of these refugees is a hot political issue in the country, and some missionary groups from Papua New Guinea have sought to provide medical and other assistance to those living in refugee camps along the border.

**SOCIAL LIFE** The comprehensive religious worldview that is pervasive in Papua New Guinea has resulted in matters of faith being integrated into most areas of social

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

life. Social occasions typically begin with a prayer. The country's mainline churches are heavily involved in health and education, and it was not until 1985 that government-run school enrollment rose higher than enrollment in church-run schools. By the early 21st century, church agencies provided 45 percent of health services in the country and more than 50 percent in rural areas.

The churches in Papua New Guinea place a strong emphasis on marriage and family, but few couples enter into formal church-sanctioned marriages. Although custom dictates that marriages be arranged by the families of the bride and groom, most churches in the country now support the modern trend of choosing one's own marriage partner. Women traditionally have a lower social status than men in Papua New Guinea, and some churches are beginning to promote gender equality, although these teachings are generally based on biblical values rather than on human rights principles. There has been some effort to decriminalize homosexuality in the country, but same-sex marriage is not considered a public issue, as it is widely opposed by the churches and the overwhelming majority of the population.

**POLITICAL IMPACT** The government of Papua New Guinea is a secular democracy with official separation between church and state. Nevertheless, the preamble to the country's constitution pledges to "guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now." Although the line between church and state is often blurred, churches cannot issue orders to the government. They do, however, often engage in lobbying—on health care issues and maternal mortality, for example—and frequently act as a conscience of sorts for the state, basing their arguments on Christian principles. Although church-based political parties have had little success in Papua New Guinea, most politicians see it as an advantage to be regarded as a "God-fearing Christian."

Because they provide almost half the health and education services in the country, churches theoretically have enough power to influence policymaking in those areas. However, church leaders often protest the frequency with which they appear to be working for the government, rather than in partnership with it, and their lack of any true influence despite the abundant resources they deliver. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea has been at times openly critical of the government, and some politicians have accused the group of meddling in the country's politics.

On a local level, particularly in the highlands, politics take on a ritual or cultic status, with candidates portraying themselves as God-fearing savior figures. Accordingly, candidates may be presented with signs of honor, such as flowers, or may be carried on people's shoulders during recruitment campaigns. Often a church pastor is invited to open campaign meetings with a prayer, and a local church youth choir will sometimes play music, perhaps with instruments provided by the candidate. A feast for the candidate's supporters typically follows, and fortune-tellers are sometimes on hand to watch for signs indicating the outcome of the election, such as a gust of wind blowing feathers in a particular direction.

In 2004 seven denominations—Catholic, Lutheran, United, Anglican, Salvation Army, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist—began working together on the Church Partnership Program (CPP). Funding was provided by the Australian government, which prefers to finance church-run operations in Papua New Guinea rather than risk funds being mismanaged in government-run programs. The CPP aims to enhance the capacity of churches to contribute to Papua New Guinea's development and social stability, focusing on the institutional strengthening of churches, service delivery, and governance. For example, the program has helped raise the capacity of school boards, allowing them to better manage their funds and make sure money goes where it is needed most.

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** Modern issues like women's ordination, birth control, abortion, and sexual abuse by clergy have become increasingly controversial in Papua New Guinea, although not to the same degree as in Western countries. For example, some have questioned whether abusive clergy from abroad have been sent to work in Papua New Guinea as a means of removing them from public scrutiny in their home countries. However, more pressing issues include the appropriateness of clergymen becoming politicians, the status of women, and fragmentation within the country's churches.

Catholic priest and politician John Momis (c. 1938–) took a leading role in the formation of the country's constitution, and several other priests and pastors have been elected to parliament, much to the consternation of bishops and church leaders. Many church leaders consider these men "lost" when they become parliamentarians. Their candidacies blur the line between church and state and confuse the common people, who may see a church's promotion of a clean election campaign without bribery as support for the priest or clergyman

running for office. In the 2012 national elections, no priests or pastors were elected to parliament.

On the status of women, churches in Papua New Guinea do not typically base their teachings on secular understandings of human rights. Rather, they tend to view humanity and human relations from a biblical perspective, teaching that all people are created in God's image, which in theory supports the equality of women. In practice, however, cultural customs enforcing the authority of men in the public sphere often take precedence, and more women in the country are beginning to object to this imbalance.

In the pre–World War II period, there were only seven major Christian denominations at work in Papua New Guinea. By 1971 there were more than 30 denominations, and that number had more than tripled by 2011. This rapid increase has led to fragmentation and competition among the different church groups. For example, villagers who used to attend the same church every Sunday as the rest of the community may now attend a different church than their next-door neighbors, while those who have joined the Seventh-day Adventists will attend services on Saturday. Although the mainline churches object to this fragmentation, there is little they can do to curb the aggressive proselytizing of some newer churches in the country.

**CULTURAL IMPACT** Early Christian missionaries in Papua New Guinea introduced the country's native people to the written word, printing facilities, and translation work, resulting in the transition from an oral tradition to a written one. In some ways, Christianity has covertly supported the notion that writers have a moral obligation to act as the conscience of society, and the first wave of Papua New Guinean writers, including Albert Maori Kiki (1931–1993), Vincent Eri (1936–1993), and Leo Hannett, raised awareness about the right to self-determination and independence. Similarly, contemporary writers, such as Lucas Kiap and Martyn Namorong, have written unfavorably about the country's social, political, and economic injustices.

Decoration of the human body is a principal traditional art form in Papua New Guinea, and some churches have accepted and adapted this practice. For example, there have been attempts to incorporate indigenous graphic forms into carved crosses and religious decorations, such as on the fascia of the St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral in Port Moresby. However, Christianity has also had a negative effect on traditional art forms, with

many churches seeing a link between traditional art and the worship of what they regard as satanic spirit beings. These churches have supported the destruction of the country's *haus tambaran* (spirit houses), which are important sources of indigenous artwork.

Most music and art associated with Christian churches in Papua New Guinea is imported from outside the country. The "praise" program on the national television channel airs music mostly from Polynesia. *Peroveta* (prophet) songs, which were introduced by early Methodist missionaries and blend Melanesian and Polynesian themes, continue to be popular in the country today.

## Other Religions

Other major world religions have minor representation in Papua New Guinea. Government statistics from 2000 reported 15,480 members of the Bahá'í faith, 800 Buddhists, 756 Muslims, 475 Hindus, and 46 members of the Jewish faith.

The Bahá'í faith, the country's most prominent religion after Christianity, was brought to Papua New Guinea in 1954 by an Australian nurse named Violet Hoehnke (1916–2004). The first Papua New Guinean Bahá'í was Apelis Mazakmat (1920–1986). With their policy of tolerance and obeying the government of the day, the Bahá'í form an unobtrusive but growing presence in Papua New Guinean society.

The population of Buddhists in Papua New Guinea does not include any known natives of the country. Buddhists are found principally in the country's main cities and other areas home to large numbers of immigrant workers. Mahayana Buddhism officially arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1996, when Buddhist workers from China and Malaysia requested a religious teacher and guide. To date, there is only one Buddhist temple in the country, located in Port Moresby. The center was established in 1994 and is now operated by Fo Guang Shan, a Taiwan-based Buddhist monastic order.

Although the 2000 census recorded fewer than 800 Muslims in Papua New Guinea, a 2012 article in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* estimated that number at closer to 5,000. Islam was formally registered as a religious organization in Papua New Guinea in 1983. Although it was first brought to the country by immigrants, the religion has since been accepted by some Papua New Guineans. Most Muslims in the country

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, and the majority reside in Port Moresby, where there is a mosque. Papua New Guinean menstrual taboos, which forbid women from touching or serving food intended for men, bear similarities to those in Islam. However, the dietary restrictions adhered to by Muslims, particularly regarding the consumption of pork, tend to separate them from mainstream Papua New Guinean society.

Although no known natives of Papua New Guinea identify as Hindu, a small population of immigrant workers follows the religion. These workers are mostly from India, Nepal, Fiji, and Australia. In small groups, they celebrate Hindu festivals like the Diwali festival of lights. Through the Sathya Sai Centre in Port Moresby, Hindus collect funds and work in cooperation with Catholic missions to help the underprivileged. Followers of Judaism in Papua New Guinea are limited to members of foreign delegations and some immigrants, who tend to practice their faith privately.

Reference to Papua New Guinean indigenous religion is problematic because of the diversity of cultures in the country. Moreover, indigenous religion in Papua New Guinea is dynamic, and in the early 21st century the development of new forms of hybrid religions has intensified in direct correlation with increased contact with the modern world. With most Papua New Guineans now professing to be Christian, indigenous religious rites are

no longer as frequent or as apparent as before, but the worldview and logic behind the ritual process in Papua New Guinea continue to hold influence.

Melanesians traditionally believe that people are born into spiritual orders shared with their ancestors and other spirit beings. Many of life's tasks are devoted to the maintenance and promotion of that cosmic spiritual order, as departure from it will most likely lead to some form of misfortune inflicted upon oneself or one's children. Some have labeled traditional Melanesian spirituality as magical or superstitious. This is because it is not concerned so much with the ultimate source of life-giving power, found by many religions in a transcendent God, as it is focused on the availability and immediate use of power to bring about life and well-being, goals that require the assistance of healers, sorcerers, and ancestral spirits.

Indigenous ritual practices range from large communal events, such as pig-slaughtering ceremonies, recurring in cycles of 20 years or more, to individual rites, such as spells, which may be malevolent or altruistic. The overall aim of these practices is to influence relationships between people and between humans and the spirit world, thus achieving overall well-being and fertility for the individual and the community. Rich symbolism and artistic displays include dancing, garden work, the killing of animals, and sexual activity to form a unity that is both



*Men in traditional attire attend a Catholic Mass at Saint Gerard's Cathedral in Kiunga, Papua New Guinea.*

© FRIEDRICH STARK/ALAMY.

economic and religious. As Ennio Mantovani wrote in *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions* (1984), “The link between the garden, the womb and the tomb is obvious in everyday life and in religious life.”

Melanesian indigenous religion is quite influential in the country’s contemporary art forms, including drama and graphic art. Groups like the Raun Raun Theatre perform domestically and internationally, dramatizing traditional myths and integrating traditional Melanesian spirituality with critiques of present-day realities. The fascia of the Papua New Guinea House of Assembly features motifs drawn from mythical traditions, illustrating how indigenous styles can be used on modern buildings. However, modern attempts to incorporate indigenous designs are not without controversy, as traditional Papua New Guinean art often draws its significance from an associated story with a sacred meaning. Thus, when the art is detached from its story and placed in an entirely new context, it becomes separated from its spiritual owner or guardian.

Cults in Papua New Guinea, which, based on oral accounts, are believed to predate Western contact, offer ways of securing ritual efficacy through shortcuts. So-called cargo cults continue to appear, promising followers easy access to money and material goods through rituals promoted by an indigenous prophet. For example, a person might put coins in a dish and turn the dish for several hours while chanting a magic spell, believing that the money will multiply. Some scholars see these cults and new religious movements as ways of searching for salvation in Melanesian terms.

*Philip Gibbs*

*See Also* Vol. I: *Christianity*

## Bibliography

### Books

- Aerts, Theo. *Christianity in Melanesia*. Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 2012.
- Garrett, John. *Where Nets Were Cast: Christianity in Oceania since World War II*. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1997.
- Gibbs, Philip. *Bountiful Harvest: The Churches in Papua New Guinea*. Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 2007.
- Gibbs, Philip. “Indigenous Spirituality: Expanding the View.” In *Dreaming a New Earth*. Edited by Gerard Hall and Joan Hendriks, 54–66. Preston, Australia: Mosaic Press, 2012.
- Irwin, Geoffrey. *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Jebens, Holger. *Pathways to Heaven: Contesting Mainline and Fundamentalist Christianity in Papua New Guinea*. Warriewood, Australia: Woodslane, 2006.
- Macintyre, Martha. “Hear Us, Women of Papua New Guinea’: Melanesian Women and Human Rights.” In *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Perspectives in the Asia Pacific Region*. Edited by Anne-Marie Hilsdon et al., 141–171. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Mantovani, Ennio, ed. *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions: A Handbook for Church Workers, Book Two of a Trilogy*. Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 1984.
- Matane, Paulius. *Exploring the Holy Lands*. New Delhi: CBS Publishers and Distributors, 2002.
- Narokobi, Bernard. *The Melanesian Way*. Suva: Fiji Institute of Pacific Studies, 1980.
- Narokobi, Bernard. “What Is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?” In *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*. Edited by John D’Arcy May, 69–77. Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 1985.
- Robbins, Joel. *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Siaguru, Anthony. *In-House in Papua New Guinea with Anthony Siaguru*. Canberra, Australia: Asia Pacific Press, 2001.
- Tomlinson, Matt, and Debra L. McDougall. *Christian Politics in Oceania*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012.
- Trompf, G. W. *Melanesian Religion and Christianity*. Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 2008.
- Zocca, Franco, ed. *Sanguma in Paradise: Sorcery, Witchcraft and Christianity in Papua New Guinea*. Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 2009.

### Periodicals

- Flower, Scott. “The Growing Muslim Minority Community in Papua New Guinea.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2012): 359–371.

### Web Sites

- “Papua New Guinea.” *The Association of Religion Data Archives (The ARDA)*. [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_I75\\_I.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_I75_I.asp) (accessed March 3, 2014).
- “Papua New Guinea: International Religious Freedom Report for 2012.” *U.S. Department of State*. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208470.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2014).
- “Papua New Guinea Profile.” *BBC News*, August 7, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15436981> (accessed March 3, 2014).
- “Religion.” *Embassy of Papua New Guinea to the Americas*. <http://www.pngembassy.org/religion.html> (accessed March 3, 2014).