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Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Church and State in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

In Papua New Guinea, attempts to keep religion and politics separate often meet with incomprehension and resistance on the part of the general populace, for in traditional Melanesian terms, religion has a political function: seen in the power to avert misfortune and ways to ensure prosperity and well being.

This paper looks at how religious narrative plays a part in contemporary political discourse in Papua New Guinea. It will look first at the links between socio-political and religious institutions, and then will consider some of the ways religious values and symbols are used and exploited to legitimise political aspirations.

In contemporary Papua New Guinea some leaders attempt to use Christian rhetoric and symbols to appeal to people's religious sentiments and to promote nationalism, however, sometimes symbols apparently achieve the agent's goal and at other times the symbol backfires on the user. How can we account for the selection, uses and effects of religious symbols in political discourse?

The churches and Christian groups seeking not so much to gain political power as to control it, appear to be divided as to whether it is better to respond with a progressive social agenda or to control political power by means of spiritual power.

Specific cases from contemporary national and local politics will be examined in detail, including events such as "operation brukim skru (operation bend the knee)," Archbishop Brian Barnes criticism of the government, and the debate over the cross on the top of the Parliament House.

The goal of the paper is to provide an anthropological perspective on religion as a category of concern in the evolving political scene in contemporary Papua New Guinea.

Observers of life in Papua New Guinea in recent times have noticed a renewed interest in “religious” phenomena, particularly in the lead up to the year 2000 (Kocher Schmid). Forms of spiritual power are becoming more and more sought after as people seek personal and collective security in the face of chronic political instability (Stewart and Strathern 1998b). Secular scientific explanations of events fall on deaf ears, and calls by some academics and church leaders to separate religion and politics meet with incomprehension and resistance on the part of the general populace.

An example of this tendency may be seen in the interpretation of events surrounding the formation of the Papua New Guinea government on 14 July 1999. After confusing everyone with a double change of support, ex-Speaker John Pundari sided at the last minute with Sir Mekere Morauta, becoming his deputy. One of the local daily newspapers recorded how people interpreted the inexplicable:

Many described Wednesday’s events leading to the election of Prime Minister as Divine intervention and Mr Pundari being a strong Christian was led by God to do what he did. “It was not him (Mr Pundari’s making). It was God who intervened and made the decision for him” said a lady staffer at the National parliament. Enga Governor Peter Ipatas said God works in mysterious ways and no one can underestimate his power nor override his plans and purpose for every individual. “I was convinced that we had a government in place and there was no doubt about it. But what transpired yesterday is a mystery and I believe God had intervened in the last minute” he said. ...Cathy Max from Western Highlands said Mr Pundari was a man of God and his decision was made by God. (*Post-Courier* 16 July 1999, 3)

In order to understand how religious narrative plays a part in contemporary political discourse in Papua New Guinea, I will look first at the links between socio-political and religious institutions, and then consider some of the ways religious values and symbols are used or exploited to legitimise political aspirations to gain political power. At the same time Christian groups, in trying to control power, appear to be divided on whether it is better to respond with a progressive social agenda or on the level of spiritual power controlling politics for good or evil. In this study I treat Papua New Guinea as one nation, however, acknowledging the many regional differences, such that an experience from the capital, Port Moresby, or from one region may appear strange or unfamiliar in another part of the country.

Relations between Political and Religious Institutions in PNG

Christian churches are the most obvious public form of religion impacting on politics in Papua New Guinea today. There have been attempts to set up political parties based on Christian principles, such as the United Christian Democratic Party in 1968, and the Christian Democratic Party in the lead-up to the 1997 elections, but such parties have attracted little support in the polls.¹ Given the chronic instability of political parties in present-day Papua New Guinea, it is unlikely that any church-party alliances would have a lasting influence (Anere).

There are few legal provisions between the State and churches in Papua New Guinea. The preamble to the Constitution pledges to “guard and pass on to those who come after us our

noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now.” Also the Constitution, (section 45) guarantees freedom of conscience, thought and religion. Other than this there is no formal definition of the relations between church and state, though some churches and church organisations, particularly the dioceses of the Catholic Church have been established by Act of Parliament, thus giving them legal status.

The most extensive field of co-operation between the government and the churches is in the areas of educational and health services. From the earliest times of Western contact, the missions and the colonial administration have shared a common function in the provision of resources and services to the people. Initially the missions provided the bulk of the educational and medical services. It was not until 1985 that government school enrolments rose higher than those in the mission schools (Fergie:15). At present the two work in partnership, and mission agency schools provide services in primary, secondary and tertiary education, including two church-run universities. Currently the government is committed to funding 80% of the K20 million budget of the church health services. While this appears generous, the government funding has been a source of tension between the government and some of the churches in recent years because of late, reduced, or non-existent funding through the provincial governments. Financially embarrassed, some church health services have had to close for long periods.²

The more cohesive and organised a church is, the more able it is to confront the state, something which irks some politicians who expect deferential obedience and respect from the churches. For example, the highly institutionalised Catholic Church, with 44% of church health worker positions, and employing 51% of the teachers in the church agency schools, has been making demands of the government.³ This, however, brings with it the likelihood of conflict between the religious authority and the state.⁴ The Catholic and Lutheran churches are the major share holders in Word Publishing Company that puts out the weekly newspaper: *Wantok* (the only national newspaper in Melanesian Pidgin).⁵

Organised religion can be a source of division and distrust. The practice of the Skate government (1997-99) to include Protestant pastors in the negotiations over Bougainville (population 68% Catholic⁶) did not go unnoticed by many Bougainvilleans and did little to win their confidence. The religious politics among the churches in Papua New Guinea creates a difficulty for the government, because there is no one organisation to deal with. The “Mainline” churches, and the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Seventh Day Adventist churches all form different groupings.⁷ There is some overlap, but in practice they operate independently. The churches tend to work together when their own welfare depends on the effectiveness of their collective action in bodies like the Churches Medical Council.

While, according to the 2000 census, 96.2% of Papua New Guineans identify as “Christian”, and the churches take a high profile in public life in Papua New Guinea, they are by no means the only form of religious expression.⁸ Popular religiosity is an important mode by which religion impacts on political relations. By popular religiosity I refer to a combination of forms of Christian piety, and practices and attitudes from traditional religion in Melanesia, which form a religious worldview at the so-called “grassroots.” Along these lines Stewart and Strathern describe “voices and visions” among the Kawelka (1988a) and the various ways of envisaging power (1988b:141-42).⁹ Power cannot be viewed solely from a secular perspective, because in

Papua New Guinea people naturally move beyond the secular to what I call the level of popular religiosity. These forms of religiosity warrant a separate study and will not be a major concern in this paper.

Failed Attempts at Setting up Institutional Links

Relations between the state and churches in Papua New Guinea are sometimes strained. Leaders of the major churches are wary of government attempts to control them, often under the guise of financing Church-run projects. The issue of a government tithe has been raised on several occasions. Back in 1987, the member for Alotau, Iairo Lasaro, quoting from the Old Testament prophet Malachi (3:7-12), stated in parliament, “I believe if this nation makes the first move to allow 10 per cent of its budget to God, this country according to the word, God himself will open the windows of heaven and pour out more blessings in this nation. Law and order, tribal fights, natural disasters and all other problems, I can assure this Government that God will guarantee the total security of this nation” (Hansard 20 November 1987, 22-24).¹⁰

A decade later, on 27 March 1997 a motion was passed in the National Parliament to introduce legislation relating to the establishment of a National Council of Christian Churches (NCCC) in Papua New Guinea. Two years later, the member for Komo-Margarima prepared a Bill for a National Council of Christian Churches Act by which the National Government would appropriate funds from the national budget annually to fund various church-run programs and institutions in the country at a higher level than is presently the case. There were also plans to have a five-year national reconciliation and spiritual development program, and a fund for a school of integral human development and national reconciliation.¹¹

Near the beginning of the proposed act, the drafter notes, “the National Parliament and other institutions of the State are created by God to protect its citizens....” If one would be cynical, one might see it as an attempt to legitimate the state, using religious language, and at the same time reducing the independence of the churches under the guise of helping them with funding. The bill proposes that all the assets, property, etc, of the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) be transferred to the NCCC. This would amount to a non-government organisation (NGO) becoming, in effect, a government organisation.

Church reactions to the proposal have been less than enthusiastic.¹² In commenting on the proposed bill, Archbishop James Ayong of the Anglican Church said, “If the Church and Government were one, how free would the Church be to offer a challenge if she sees the Government doing something that is wrong or immoral? How could she be critical if she is part of the same organisation? The Church’s role in speaking out in areas of faith and morals is preserved by her independence.” The PNGCC General Secretary, Reverend Pat Kila also voiced his concern that “If the Government gives funding they would be in control. Would the Church’s representative stand with the government or the opposition?” (*Independent* 9 October 1998, 17).

In another move, in March 2000 the churches received a letter from the Department of Home Affairs instructing church leaders to be present in Port Moresby for a meeting with the government. They were told that the Prime Minister expected them in Port Moresby on the

Tuesday of the following week. They were informed that they were to meet at the luxurious Park Royal Hotel and that the whole enterprise would be funded from Gaming Board Funds! Not surprisingly, the Churches refused the “invitation”. Mrs Gegeyo, the General Secretary of the PNGCC commented, “If it wishes to hold a meeting with the Churches, the government should rightfully contact them and not instruct and treat them as its employees” (*Independent* 30 March 2000, 21).

There have been few developments since that time. In November 2000 the churches were included in an NGO Summit at Lea Lea Village. However, little has come of it, since many of the church people invited did not have the authorisation of their churches, and also because one year later the report on the meeting had not appeared.¹³ Unofficially, relations between the government and churches continue to depend on individual relationships between church leaders and political figures.

Religious Symbols in Political Discourse

In contemporary Papua New Guinea some leaders attempt to use Christian symbols and rhetoric to appeal to people’s religious sentiments and to promote nationalism, however, sometimes symbols apparently achieve the agent’s goal and at other times the symbol backfires on the user. How can we account for the selection, uses and effects of religious symbols in political discourse?

The Cross on the *Haus Tambaran*

Relations between politics and religion were brought dramatically to public attention early in the year 2000, when the speaker, Bernard Narokobi had a large cross fixed on top of the parliament building. It was illuminated so as to be visible at night. In explaining his action to the parliament he said the cross is, “the light of Calvary. With your concurrence I would ask that this cross remains. It is a memory of our hope in the future as Christians. This may not be the mountain or the hill of Calvary, however, the way we tend to crucify each other in here, we may as well nickname the hill on which Parliament stands, the Calvary Hill” (Hansard 13 April 2000, 2).

Not everyone agreed with the Speaker. Member for Bulolo, Samson Napo was determined to have it removed, arguing that “it makes Parliament look stupid in the eyes of Christians in this country” (Hansard 21 June 2000, 6). Many of the arguments aired centered on the inappropriateness of putting a cross on a “profane” building like the House of Assembly.

Comments in the daily newspapers centered on the division between profane/sacred, sin/holiness. “Observer” from Boroko felt that it was an insult to the cross because “the National Parliament has become a place where Members of Parliament argue, swear and plot ways to destroy each other. The National Parliament is not a holy place. You can never put darkness and daylight together” (*Post-Courier* 27 June 2000, 10). The parliament building has a fascia shaped in the form of a traditional Sepik spirit house or *haus tambaran*, and is adorned with an array of traditional symbols. “Citizen” of Madang went so far as to suggest that the members of parliament leave the cross as it was and remove the bottom part of the fascia of the house with

its, “immoral naked carvings. Believe it or not these images represent and manifest the activities of unseen ungodly evil spirits that have been the force behind all these wrong doings, and what can evil bring to the good and well-being of this nation” (*Post-Courier* 3 July 2000, 10).

Speaker Narokobi defended his decision to put up the cross saying that the cross was a reminder that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country as provided for in the Constitution, and follows a Christian calendar. “Unlike other men, in kingdoms and empires, this man from Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, he didn’t have anything, but had that wooden cross and the world somehow has revolved around that wooden cross. I thought it was worth commemorating that humble man in one of our most important institutions, Parliament, and I thought it was a good idea to put it up on top” (*Independent* 10 July 2000, 7).

Narokobi then went on to address the question of the sacred and profane, saying that Parliament makes decisions that are sacred, and for the common good of the people. “The value, that pillar of our society, its Christian principle with a physical, visible, tangible object and cross is not only worn by reverends, priests and pastors, it can be worn by anybody and it can be put on mountain tops and when the soldiers put the cross on the mountain top nobody really complained” (*Independent* 10 July 2000, 7). He was referring to the lighted Easter cross customarily erected by soldiers on a hilltop overlooking Boroko in the Capital, Port Moresby.

Perhaps not all the members of parliament understand or share the Speaker’s ideal that what goes on in parliament is sacred because it is for the common good of the people. Eventually, while Mr Narokobi was absent from the Speaker’s chair, Mr Napo successfully moved that the cross be removed.

Mr Narokobi did not have the cross erected for his own personal political gain. Rather, it was an attempt by a devout Catholic to bring a symbol of Christian power into the very center of political power. Some people sensed a shocking conflict in bringing these two powerful symbols together. Narokobi’s theology was not appreciated, and he made a radical move too quickly with the result that his action was unacceptable to the majority in parliament.

Reference to God’s “Will” to Legitimise Political Aspirations and Actions

Not all the religious values and symbols used by politicians are as obvious as a cross on the roof of Parliament. A more subtle but very common form of religious narrative in Papua New Guinea politics is reference to Biblical passages having to do with “calling,” and following the “will” of God. For example, in campaign speeches in the Highlands there were frequent references to David, the young boy chosen by Saul to be King of the Jews and to lead them in victory against their enemies. David had shown his prowess already by single-handedly defeating the great Philistine champion, Goliath (1 Sam 17). In a campaign speech at Yampu in the Enga Province, candidate Stanley Kaka announced, “In Israel prophet Samuel anointed David to be the King. David was young and many of his clansmen thought that David was incapable but Samuel did so under God’s direction because He knew the potential inside him. If God would like Enga to be saved from corruptions and other evil desires of leaders, he will appoint or let the right person to win the election.”¹⁴

This idea of being “elected” by God already before the national election was echoed by many candidates. For example, while sugarcane was being distributed to his supporters in Wabag, Samuel Tei Abel, told people how he felt God was telling him to stand. He would win the election because God would “give” it to him.¹⁵ One heard this theme again and again. Some hinted that God was calling them to save their people. In his campaign in Kandep, Peter Ipatas, Governor of Enga, referred to Moses who had worked miracles like supplying water from a rock and commanding the Red Sea to part so that the Israelites could be saved from Pharaoh’s army. Referring to himself he said that surely people could see the work (miracles) he did while acting as the Governor for only a few months. Seeing this, they should believe that he was chosen as God’s answer to their prayers.

In November 2000, the Prime Minister raised serious questions about the performance of Governor Ipatas and his provincial government, and gave them 21 days to reply to a series of accusations. A typical reaction was that of a businessman from Sari who, at a public meeting in Wabag recalled that God chose Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. However, in the desert Moses made the mistake of hitting the rock twice when trying to get water for his people. This did not please God, but God forgave him and he continued to lead the people. Likewise, Governor Ipatas might have made some “small mistakes” which would not please God, however, God would not let the Governor down because God has chosen Peter Ipatas and given him the power to carry the Enga Province on his shoulders.¹⁶

On a national level, the long-serving member for Maprik, Peter Lus, reminded his fellow parliamentarians that “I was sent by God to advise you. I wish to assure you that I will return in 2002 because my mission is not yet completed” (Hansard 9 October 2000, 4). Prime Minister Skate frequently referred to his becoming prime minister as an answer to prayer.¹⁷ When during his campaign, he declared, “I am going to lead these seventeen men with the power of Jesus Christ,” (*Independent* 11 April 1997, 7) he was obviously appealing to people’s religious sentiments for political ends.

Bill Skate made frequent use of such imagery. With American televangelist Benny Hinn, he declared, “The Prime minister of this country is none other than Jesus Christ (and) I am his ambassador” (*National* 3 May 1999, 3). However in the end his religious references contributed to his demise. When, at a village in the Central Province, he likened himself to Jesus, sleeping and eating with the poor and the sick, and being “persecuted” by the opposition, he was confronted days later by the headline, “PM, you’re not like Christ” (*Post-Courier* 8 March 1999, 4).

Such imagery is used too by leaders who are not parliamentarians. The military commander who sparked off the “Sandline Crisis” (a quasi-military coup over mercenaries being sent to Bougainville) is reported as saying that he was an instrument used by God (*Post-Courier* 11 June 1997, 1).

Not everyone agreed with these sentiments. The *National* daily newspaper published an editorial entitled “God as a political weapon” saying, “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” (3 April 1997, 14). If one would take this form of

“predestination” seriously, then it would be a matter of finding out who is the chosen one so that they could vote for him. This would make the voter’s task simply one of divination or discernment, and seriously devalue the voting power of the people.

Unlike Polynesian chiefs, Melanesian Big Men of old did not appeal to the ancestors to bolster their reputation. Groups might muster up the power of the ancestors, but individuals did not. Most of the examples above illustrate how novel present-day attempts to legitimise individual claims by manipulating religion through reference to the power of God fail, unless that a political figure can continue to demonstrate those claims in concrete practical terms.

The Symbol of the “God-fearing” Politician

During the lead up to the 1997 elections some candidates tried all kind of means to demonstrate that they could claim to be persons who were “God-fearing” or “Jesus-following.” A few placed their photo alongside the photo of Jesus on their election posters. However the general populace was not impressed by this practice.

In Enga, candidate Stanley Kaka came riding on horseback with a pandanus leaf hat instead of an expensive “Australian cowboy” hat and wearing a string bag rather than carrying a briefcase. He told the people that Jesus became human to show them the path to His father's kingdom. In the same way, leaders of government should stay with the people, participate and cooperate in local activities and show by example the path towards prosperity. “The good shepherd stays close to his sheep and loves all equally [see Jn 10]. He spends most of his time in the field with his sheep. Jesus lived and shared all his life with the poor and the neglected. He totally understood their problems and shared their problems.” Stanley Kaka was trying to follow that example. He added,

I, Kaka have not come from a rich family or from another province. I have been with the people back in the village and I know all their problems. What I am saying is the truth. Like the sheep that hears its master’s voice and follows him, you should cast your votes for me because what I am saying is true and my truth should touch your hearts. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped when she heard Mary's greeting [see Lk 1:41]. That happened because both women's hearts were filled with joy and trust, which showed physically when the unborn baby moved inside his mother’s womb. Similarly, if my words touch you, it means that my words are authentic and honest.¹⁸

Despite the symbolism and the Biblical references, he did not win a seat.

Back in Port Moresby, in 1999, Prime Minister Bill skate, on the defensive after public criticism a few weeks previously from the Catholic Archbishop, was glad to be able to show his support for visiting televangelist Benny Hinn – a symbol of modern religion and prosperity.¹⁹ The televangelist had been invited by the Prime Minister to come as a guest of the National government, and was promised a welcome, including a state reception (*National* 19 January 1999, 1), and a contribution of K180,000 towards the crusade (*National* 15 April 1999, 3). The televised arrival showed Benny Hinn being met at the airport by the Prime Minister and other leaders, along with the Royal Constabulary band, a choir and a police escort. For two nights the

John Guise stadium was packed to capacity, and aided by 13 tonnes of sound equipment, the crusade could be heard far and wide.

Benny Hinn's message at a Parliamentary prayer breakfast in his honor was, "God is saying to Papua New Guinea, 'I am ready — are you ready?'" It seems that not all the parliamentarians were ready for the message, as fewer than a quarter of them showed up for the prayer breakfast. The Prime Minister said that Pastor Hinn's visit was in accordance with "the Lord God's purpose to save the nation from its problems" (*National* 3 May 1999, 3). However, the late Governor, Father Ambane of the Simbu Province, expressed concern that "the Papua New Guinea government and certain politicians could be taking a free ride, using Pastor Hinn's crusade to cover their own sins. 'Papua New Guineans should not fall for this type of con artist, be they faith healers or politicians'" (*Post-Courier* 29 April 1999, 2). Bill Skate's highly publicised association with Benny Hinn did not save his government. Three months later he was forced to resign.

Later, in July 2001, the visit of evangelist Mark Finley as part of the Seventh Day Adventist, *Acts 2000 Revelation of Hope* crusade was televised from 6-12 July across the country and beyond Papua New Guinea, culminating in the baptism of 2,300 people at Port Moresby's Ela Beach (*Post-Courier* 24 July 2001, 3). The government donated K100,000 so that provinces could buy satellite equipment to receive the telecasts (*National* 31 May 2001, 6). When welcoming Pastor Finley and his team, the minister for Lands, John Pundari said that the Government supported the crusade, adding that the country would be richly blessed by God's abundant grace (*Post-Courier* 5 July 2001, 5). A week later though, Brother Andrew Simpson, leader of the Christian Brothers in Papua New Guinea, in a letter to the editor, complained about how a "crusade opened with the special commendation from the Prime Minister had turned into 'Catholic bashing' by the presenters of the crusade" (*Post-Courier* 18 July 2001, 10).

Personal claims to be "God-fearing" or association with prominent religious figures, particularly those from overseas, may be seen as attempts to claim political power through moral legitimacy. There is also the implication that one is self-sacrificing rather than acting out of self-interest. As a consequence, if things go wrong in these uncertain times, one can always claim to be absolved of blame because "God works in strange ways."

God-fearing Politicians or Ritual expert?

In traditional PNG culture, Highlands big men were seldom themselves ritual specialists, but would generally call on the services of diviners and ritual experts. Their real power lay in being central figures in organising ritual responses to counter threatening events and ensure societal well-being. How does it work today?²⁰

Significant in the 1997 elections was the election of two Catholic priests as regional members for Western Highlands and Simbu respectively. Twenty years previously John Momis, at the time a Catholic priest, served several terms in parliament as a priest-politician, before resigning from the active priestly ministry in the Church. Momis's bishop, Gregory Singkai, shielded him from critics who could not understand how he could "serve two masters." By the time of the 1997 elections times had changed. The PNG/SI Catholic Bishops' Conference, supported by the

Vatican, was taking a strong position against priests standing for election to parliament. Despite the prohibition, three diocesan priests stood for election and two were successful. Farther Robert Lak and Father Louis Ambane have been suspended from public sacramental ministry in the church, nevertheless, both make use of their clerical title.

For the two Catholic clerics, getting elected to political office may have been easier than exercising it. Father Ambane's election was nullified by the Supreme Court in October 1998 on the grounds that the Electoral Commission had failed to provide an adequate number of ballot boxes for the elections. He then increased his percentage of the vote in a by-election, only to end up fighting a court battle to regain the governor's position. Robert Lak's passage was even more tortuous. Having defeated strongman Paias Wingti in what was called a "David and Goliath" contest, he soon became embroiled in a prolonged legal battle over charges of unlawful carnal knowledge and of producing a pornographic video. One charge was eventually dismissed on technical grounds, and the other charge was filed (*Post-Courier* 17 June 1999, 3). Several years later the complainants admitted that they had been coerced by outside forces with political interests to make their claims against Father Lak (*Post-Courier* 4 December 2001, 3).

After his election Father Lak organised an open air prayer meeting at Pope John Paul Oval, Mount Hagen, where thousands of people gathered to pray for and bless their newly elected members of parliament. The gathering according to Father Lak was to give thanks and praise to God for working through the small people to elect them to the National Parliament. Referring implicitly to his having won in the "David and Goliath" confrontations he said, "The big people have had their turn and I take this opportunity to thank the small people and particularly the churches, laymen and women and the people who worked tirelessly to make this become a reality" (*National* 3 July 1997, 3).

The question arises. Considering the tradition of separating the roles of ritual expert and big man, why would people want to elect clerics for the role of MP or Governor? I think it shows the extent to which the social situation has changed in recent years. Stewart and Strathern (1998b: 133) argue that changes in economic life, democracy as patronage and a pervasive but weak state have lead to a critical situation for Hagen people, leading them to search for security and identity in religion and ritual. I would argue further that people have voted in the two clerics in the hope these men will have the best chance of dealing with the threats created by corruption, violence in their provinces. The clerics elected, having no wives and with limited financial means, appear to be the antithesis of the traditional leader. However, they could be seen as big men belonging to a church with resources, and as ritual experts in terms of their perceived power to perform the traditional role of averting misfortune and opening ways to well-being. In the present circumstances it is not a matter simply of organising events to counter misfortune, but of realising that purely "political" solutions have not worked. If that is the case then try the religious solution.

Nationalism and Religious Rhetoric

Sometimes politicians draw parallels between Israel and Papua New Guinea as a "promised land" rich in resources provided by God (Hansard 17 July 2001, 11). In times of crisis religious sentiments may be roused to promote national consciousness. For example, in 1997, during the

“Sandline” crisis which almost resulted in a military coup, 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.”²¹

One might ask, however, to what degree nationalist consciousness exists in Papua New Guinea. There was no violent struggle for independence as experienced by many other nations. According to Bernard Narokobi, a sense of national purpose, national ethic or national morality was not present at the time of independence except among a few politicians and civil servants (p.75). Today, a quarter of a century later, Independence or National Day comes and goes, and people “celebrate” only when prizes or monetary rewards are on offer. Michael Jacobsen has identified resistance to a “national” culture in PNG, and Jeffrey Clark argues that national consciousness is virtually nonexistent in the Southern Highlands Province of PNG (Jacobsen; Clark). What national unity does exist is often attributed to the work of the churches (Trompf:254). If this is true – and I will argue below that the churches are also a source of disunity – it is no doubt due to the penetration of the churches into the rural areas. Michael Young notes (p,125),

It is a common observation that the colonial state did not penetrate as deeply and as effectively into the villages of the Western Pacific as the missions and Churches, whose successes, generally speaking, have far exceeded those of any government agency. The missions were able to govern and to provide the services – of health and education in particular in a manner, which assured their prominence after independence. The successor states of the colonial era have inherited this incomplete penetration into rural, provincial or peripheral areas. Notably in PNG today the state is actually on the retreat in many parts of the country, providing few services and making fewer demands on its citizens than did the colonial state. In such circumstances of weak state penetration the Church (and to a lesser degree other non-governmental organisations) remains dominant in everyday matters of village life. To a corresponding degree, the entrenched doctrines of Christianity as unifying forces are more salient than the newer ideologies of nationalism.

Now, with agreement for autonomy in Bougainville and further moves for regional autonomy within the nation there is more a felt sense of ethnicity than of nationalism. Jeffrey Clark’s prediction that regional ethnicities may presage a round of “claims for independence from the postcolonial state itself” seems to becoming a reality (p, 89).

Bernard Narokobi has attempted to identify a common sense of Melanesian identity in the “Melanesian Way.”²² Narokobi sees the modern Papua New Guinean’s identity in terms of the dual pillars of the constitution: the noble traditions and Christian principles. Christian faith builds upon the values of the Melanesian cosmic vision of life. Narokobi has helped raise the awareness of a Melanesian identity – what Jacobsen calls the “collective we” of neotraditionalism (Jacobsen:234), but how much this translates into social cohesiveness and a common sense of purpose today is a matter for debate. According to Jacobsen, people in the Highlands see such ideological constructs as *tok win*, or just “useless talk” (p, 241).

Nevertheless, Christianity as an integral component in Papua New Guinean national identity has become a matter for debate in recent times, due to two issues, firstly, the increase in violent crime, and secondly, the growing awareness of the presence of people of other faiths in the country – namely Muslims.

In 1996, the Government declared the year to be a year of law enforcement and during a preview of the launching of the plan, the Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan stated that, “While rapes, robberies, drug abuse, the use of firearms and murders continue at the level that currently plagues our country, we cannot call ourselves a Christian nation, because the criminals that destroy the base of our society are from within”(Independent 22 December, 4). A few weeks later on a similar topic he declared how good it would be if people would respect each other so that they could “walk about freely enjoying God’s special acre” (Post-Courier 29 February, p.2 of special feature). Enaha Peri Henao sees these religious references in Chan’s speeches as “an indication of the character of political discourse” in order to implicate the churches approval for the measures being taken (p, 79). Violence has escalated throughout the whole of Papua New Guinea society in recent years, to a degree that the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Hans Schwemmer declared at the funeral of a murdered priest, that Papua New Guinea’s claim to being a Christian country “is getting weaker every day”. The editorial opinion in the press the following week was even more scathing.

The violence currently exhibited towards mainly Catholic clergy and lay workers cannot be viewed in isolation from the chaos and turmoil that categorises contemporary Christian religious practice in this country. Indeed there is a tragic possibility that the Christian spiritual life of PNG, riven into fragments by disunity and self-aggrandisement, will very soon parallel the corrupt, cynical and barren secular society that plagues our daily lives. Bishop Schweimer (*sic*) speaks the truth. PNG’s claims to being a “Christian country” diminish daily (National 4 September 2001, 14).

The most visible sign of Muslim presence in PNG is the mosque completed recently in Hohola, a suburb of Port Moresby. With news filtering in from overseas of Christian-Muslim conflict in Indonesia, and the terrorist attacks in the USA, some Christian pastors, such as Pastor Lapa, chairman of the PNG Evangelistic Association, have called for the government to ban Muslims from Papua New Guinea (Post-Courier 25 September 2001, 3). It has been argued in Parliament that freedom of religion in the PNG Constitution applies only to religions that refer to “God”, not “Allah”, and that Parliament should adopt a “Christian” law for the country (Hansard 27 July 2000,5-6; 18 August 2000, 23-24). Others, notably the Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the PNG Council of Churches have defended the principle of freedom of worship. This latter view won the support of the press, which declared,

For years the assertion that ‘Papua New Guinea is a Christian nation’ has been accepted without much thought. Politicians and ordinary citizens alike have used the phrase to justify and support thousands of different actions and concepts over the two and a half decades of this country’s independence. But what do we really mean when we refer to PNG as being a Christian country? Broadly speaking the term has more cultural than religious meaning. Generally it is used to defend the perceived status quo against challenges and potential change (National 24 September 2001, 14).

In October 2001, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Ogio raised the issue in his tribute to the late Archbishop Schwemmer,

We claim to be a Christian country – but as the late Archbishop said, the claim seems to be getting weaker by the day given the level of heinous crimes being committed – and in support of that claim our churches have a right to participate in public debate, even political debate, provided however it is not done in a partisan, or party political way. If we are to overcome evil, and build a more secure future for our people, then there must be a return to Christian principles and values. That requires a forthright and robust Church – led by men and women of conviction and compassion. We also need to involve the Church more fully in the tasks which it already does so well – delivery of health care, school and vocational education.²³

Just how being Christian will continue to be a shared Papua New Guinea value and how much the recent developments outlined above will contribute to a new form of imagining Papua New Guinea as a “Christian Country” remains to be seen. Member for Kerema, Tom Koraea, gave a new twist to the issue recently, saying that accepting Muslim “Boat People” would be a sign that PNG is indeed a Christian country (Hansard 15 October 2001, 13).

Selection, Uses and Effects of Religious Symbols

Sometimes symbols apparently achieve the agent’s goal and at other times not. How can we account for the selection, uses and effects of religious symbols in political discourse? I think there are two principal criteria for the selection of particular religious symbols or religious language: legitimation, and links with forms of “spiritual” power.

The appeal to “God’s will” or the claim to be a “God-fearing” candidates are obvious attempts to seek legitimation of their role, even to the extent of claiming political leadership by divine right. Allying oneself with a visiting international televangelists may have a similar motive, particularly after de-legitimising public criticism from bodies like the Catholic Bishops’ conference. References to Papua New Guinea as a “Christian” country are also often attempts at legitimation through appeal to a sense of national consciousness.

Linking with forms of “spiritual” power appeals to the Melanesian imagination with its pervasive integration of the sacred and profane. Political power is never totally divorced from the “spiritual” as may be seen especially in time of misfortune or when there is a fear of the approaching “end times.”²⁴ Spiritual power may be imagined in terms of God’s “blessings” – an expression used frequently in parliamentary debates. It also appeals to the imagination when combined with military metaphors such as “spiritual warfare” or the “fight” against Satan.²⁵ Consider two examples from parliamentary debates, firstly, comments by Judah Akesim (member for Ambunti-Drekikir) (Hansard 10 May 2000, 44).

Law and order problems are increasing and as leaders, we are to be blamed for setting a bad example. We cannot put the blame on our citizens. If we have leaders who are righteous then the laws that we make will be blessed by God and the citizens of this country will respect and honour them. ...We declare in our Constitution that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country

and yet, - its leaders are ungodly. That is why God will not bless us. He will only do so when leaders have a change of heart.

Another exchange took place in parliament on 11 October, 2000 (Hansard pp.17-19)

Sir Tom Koraea (Member for Kerema): "...in my observation, during the 1900s tribal wars were the norm because of our lack of knowledge about the word of God. During the period from 1935 to the end of World War Two, the missionaries brought the Word of God to us."

Mr Peter Peipul (Member for Imbonggu): "We ate some of them."

Sir Tom Koraea: "Maybe you ate them; I did not."

"Mr Speaker, God's message was given to us to change our attitudes from fighting and killing our friends. Papua New Guineans responded positively. From that time up until 1982, Papua New Guineans changed their attitudes.

God has no blessings for leaders in this Chamber. And that is why our people do not respect us and commit such crimes as breaking into houses, raping our women and killing. And they will continue to do so until such time their leaders change their attitudes.

Mr Speaker, during the last few weeks, we have been throwing mud at each other. This Government belongs to God. It says so in the Bible and yet we think that this Government belongs to Sir Thomas', and that it gives me the right to treat the people and this Parliament as a joke, and make evil plans and in the process, destroy the people of Papua New Guinea."

One can see in this exchange in the House of Parliament, a combination of militaristic metaphors ("destroying the people") and attempts at legitimation ("Christian country", "Government belongs to God. It says so in the Bible..."), with the view of "God's blessings" (power) as contingent on behavior, and listening to God's word.

Why then, are some attempts at using religious narrative and symbol successful and others not? The Enga Governor, Peter Ipatas appears to have been relatively successful in his references to Moses with the implication that he would lead people to the "promised land." Gary Teske, writing from Ipatas's Province, has noted 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 (p, 247). They are impressed by forms of worship that produce experiential effects in those who participate. Similar criteria apply in deciding on the relative value of political figures. People judge how effective their candidate will be opening the way for "goods and services" to be delivered to their district. This sounds like "cargo thinking" and to some degree it is. Political power with access to Waigani (the seat of government in Port Moresby) is perceived as being the key to prosperity. Despite the suspension and reinstatement of his Government, Ipatas has been relatively successful in maintaining access to Waigani and its power.²⁶

Some others mentioned previously in this paper, have been successful because of their links to religious institutions independent of the political structures. Archbishop Brian Barnes, who, as

will be seen later in this paper, has played a significant role in controlling political power in recent years, derives his moral power from a combination of personal qualities, his experience over many years as police chaplain, and his role as Catholic Archbishop of Port Moresby. Father's Robert Lak and Luis Ambane may also attribute their initial success to their church connections, though since that time people have had the chance to evaluate their performance more in terms of Teske's "effective power criterion."

However, for many, the use of religious narrative and symbols on the political scene in recent years is hardly a success story. Joseph M Tia was ridiculed for including a picture of Jesus alongside himself in his campaign poster. Bill Skate was eventually accused of hypocrisy when he likened himself to Jesus, and Stanley Kaka's fondness for Biblical allusions was not sufficient to have him win the elections.

Bernard Narokobi's failed campaign to have a cross on the roof of parliament illustrates a tension that must be acknowledged in contemporary Papua New Guinea – a tension between a sense of the integrity of the sacred and profane with its consequence in the intermingling of religions and politics, and on the other hand the desire to preserve the separation of church and state. Narokobi, with his Catholic view of the kingdom of God, attempted to symbolise how parliamentary decisions are sacred because they are for the common good of the people. However, his view was unacceptable to those like Samson Napo who prefer a "two kingdoms" theology that sees an unavoidable conflict between the kingdom of God and the realm of Satan.²⁷

It seems that the use of religious narrative and symbol is successful so long as it does not go too far and the proponent is able to demonstrate experiential effects. Failure comes with claiming too much, or, in the case of Narokobi, getting caught in the tension between two very different theologies.

Religious Diversity

In November 2000 at the joint government, churches and NGO summit, one of the issues discussed concerned communication between the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) and the Papua New Guinea Evangelical Alliance (PNGEA). The two bodies are roughly divided to represent the so-called "mainline" churches and the conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches.²⁸ It is neither possible nor advisable to establish clear divisions, yet the existence of the two bodies illustrates what I see as two very different approaches to faith and politics. I distinguish what I term the "realists" from the "spiritualists". Generally the "realists" are represented in the PNGCC and the "spiritualists" in the PNGEA. Often their goals are similar but the means to attain those ends sometimes lead to misunderstanding and strained relations. I will illustrate the differences with two examples, Operation Brukim Skru and the criticism of Archbishop Barnes.

Operation Brukim Skru

One of the most significant events for the involvement of 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 churches.²⁹

Operation Brukim Skru began as a prayer campaign for the election of a God-fearing government.³⁰ At the beginning of 1997 the question arose whether there should be Christian volunteers to work at the polling sites in order to provide “prayer cover” during the actual polling. Some Christian leaders felt that God was saying, “Why pray if you're not prepared to be the answer to your prayers?” So they set out to find 20,000 Christian volunteers, whose job it would be to pray at polling sites so as to keep corruption (and evil spirits) away from the sites. The Electoral Commissioner supported the idea, but as it turned out the plan ran into some difficulties 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* carried the headline, “NIO: Plot by leading citizens.” (*National* 2 April 1997, 1). A report in the *Post Courier* (1 April 1997, 4) the previous day included the following:

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”.

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.”³¹ 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, 13; *National* 18 September 1997, 3).

The outcome of the 1997 elections was ambiguous, with the parties from the previous government still in power. Those associated with Operation Brukim Skru were 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. Prime Minister Bill Skate pointed out that now the Governor General, the Chief Justice and himself were born again Christians and that the new speaker of the house was a devout Christian (SDA). “Jesus has conquered Satan here in PNG,” he said.

Archbishop Barnes Intervenes

It was not long before some churchmen started to become alarmed at the direction of the government. Archbishop Brian Barnes, of the Catholic Church decided to speak out. In his 1999 Easter message he wrote,

We are living in a real world, and we can't separate the spiritual from the material and practical problems which we most certainly have, (eg, church health workers going unpaid, educational institutions not supported financially, increasing crime,) refusal by our most prominent politician to undergo questioning by police goes against the principle that everyone is equal before the law (*Post-Courier Supplement* 1 April 1999, 25).

He warned that the future of Papua New Guinea as a free democratic country was threatened. The next day the *Post-Courier* headlines read, "Bishop: Govt must go." Interviews with the Archbishop appeared with the Archbishop expressing stronger opinions than in the Easter message. He was quoted as saying that the personal conduct of many PNG leaders is shameful, and that there was a need for a change of government (*Post-Courier* 1 April 1999, 3). The newspapers were quick to support the Archbishop. The Editorial viewpoint in the *Post-Courier* (1 April 1999, 11) reads:

We applaud Archbishop Barnes for being forthright on the state of the nation — he has truly expressed the views of thousands of Papua New Guineans about their country. We also endorse his view that churches must speak up for the sufferings of the people and the way politicians are running this country they have a moral and spiritual obligation to do so.

The issue became the leading story on radio and television. Support soon came from other Christian churches.³² Sophia Gegeyo, the General Secretary of the PNGCC is quoted as saying, "...Politicians cannot keep the Church quiet while the people they represent suffer as a result of bad government decisions and leadership.... The bishop has spoken the minds of the ordinary people in the country" (*Post-Courier* 7 April 1999, 3).

Protests came from the government. Public Service minister, Peter Peipul said that the Archbishop's outburst was unethical and misleading (*Post-Courier* 7 April 1999, 3). The Minister of Justice, Simon Kaumi, claimed that there has been collusion between the Archbishop and the opposition (*Post-Courier* 6 April 1999, 2). Jacob Wama, Minister of Finance and Internal Revenue Affairs, said that the bishop's outburst was out of biblical context, which teaches Christians to pray for those in authority (*Post-Courier* 6 April 1999, 2). Such criticisms prompted the head of the Anglican Church, Archbishop Ayong, to write in a letter to the *Post-Courier*:

Any politician who tries to suggest that church leaders should keep out of politics does not know his Bible. From the time Israel moved into Canaan, the spiritual leaders of God's people have been challenging, rebuking, correcting and, at times, condemning the political leaders when they wandered from God's path. That duty remains today. Saying this is not an unjustified interference in politics by the Church, but an exercising of a legitimate democratic right, and, we believe, an important responsibility in the light of the demands of Christian justice" (*Post-Courier* 14 April 1999, 11).

Prime Minister Skate, publicly at least, took a conciliatory stance, inviting himself to meet with all the Catholic Bishops on 16th April at their annual meeting in Rabaul. Then, on 26th April he met at the Travelodge Hotel with leaders from a number of churches. Three months later, on July 7, the Prime Minister had lost so much support that he was forced to resign.

While the significance of the Archbishop's criticism may be debated, it is clear that his action acted as a catalyst for others to work for a change of government. Though not mentioned by name, it appears that Riddler Kimave was referring to the Catholic Church, when in Parliament he said: "I direct my questions to the minister responsible for religion. My question is in regard to one particular church, which, seems to be heavily involved in the politics of Papua New Guinea to the extent where its powers are almost on the same level as that of the Government. What action will the Minister take on churches that are involved in politics? I ask because this church was involved in the removal of the former Prime Minister" (Hansard 6 June 2000, 8).

The Archbishop himself remains somewhat skeptical of attempts at reform. A few months after the formation of the new government he is quoted as saying, "when a church leader is critical of government performance, a common reaction is to seek the views of the Church on a particular plan or initiative and afterwards ignore it" (*Independent* 2 September 1999, 2).

These two examples illustrate the different approaches of evangelical Christians, and mainline churches represented by Archbishop Barnes: the former involving themselves in "spiritual warfare" with evil forces; the latter preferring to confront the political system and its leaders. Appealing to a narrative that has the earth as a battleground, the more conservative Protestant churches reputedly see the present world as evil and wicked in stark contrast to the world to come and the glorious return of Christ. However, their professedly apolitical position in effect is quite political as their stance contributes to the maintenance of the societal status quo. By contrast Catholics stress that God "works" within human and created life. Thus one should not totally divorce religious practice from social and political realities. Despite these theological differences, the contrast is not so much between denominations as between the more liberal Christians who tend to take what I term a "realistic" viewpoint and the conservatives who have a more spiritualist view of reality.

Alarmist Religious Discourse

Papua New Guinea is renowned for millennial movements, and the millennial thinking surrounding the year 2000 gave added urgency to finding "God-fearing politicians" in the 1997 elections. In the Highlands (Enga) 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! Stewart and Strathern (1998b:135) note that the winning candidate in the Dei Council for the 1997 national elections "declared himself a born-again Christian and claimed his support to have been derived from his standing as a churchman of the Assemblies of God."

Throughout the campaign period leading up to the 1997 elections there were persistent rumors about Catholic ambitions to "take over" the government.³³ 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” making the local currency worthless. The postage stamp to commemorate Pope John Paul’s visit to Papua New Guinea for the “beautification” (*sic*) of Rabaul catechist Peter ToRot was seen by some as a sure sign of the imminent take over by Rome. These rumors, spread by some members of churches like the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA), may seem laughable to outsiders, but are indeed troubling to many people, especially those in the more isolated areas of the country. Such rumors have continued into the year 2000, aided, no doubt, by frequent (sometimes full-page) advertisements in the daily papers about “World’s Last Warning,” by a dissident SDA group, showing pictures of President Clinton and the Pope and predicting dire consequences from the current world order.³⁴

By far the great majority of the population in Papua New Guinea has no water, power or telephone services, and has never seen a computer, yet towards the end of 1999 the daily papers were telling them to stock up with food and water and candles in case a Y2K problem should occur. For many people, especially those in more isolated areas, such news only added to long held fears about the end of the world. This, coupled with alarmist preaching from pastors in many of the churches only made the end of the millennium even more threatening. Conservative preaching links the present state of world events to prophetic signs for the imminent second coming of Christ.

The year 2000 having come and gone, many people are left in a state of insecurity and confusion. Some people have lost their savings in fast (pyramid) money schemes that had been backed by certain church pastors preaching a theology of prosperity. For the moment the Pope is getting some respite and since 2001 preachers in the market places are focusing on the terrorist attacks in the USA, and what they see as the institutional evil in the World Bank and the IMF. Cultural reconstruction continues and the political rhetoric of good and evil reemerges in different forms.³⁵

Continued Efforts

The examples given above illustrate highly symbolic attempts to impress the voting public and gain political power, and attempts by churches to control power. There have been a number of less publicised but equally symbolic acts by Christians to influence politics through prayer and ritual. Conservative evangelical churches are reticent to publicly criticise the government, partly because of Paul’s instruction that Christians should be subject to governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7). However they do believe in the power of intercessory prayer, which they carry out often in highly “prophetic” or symbolic ways. For example, in 1999 Operation “Prea Banis” (Prayer Wall) saw teams of “intercessors” going to pray in government departments, including the chamber of parliament. Moreover, they convinced the Prime Minister to allow them to use the official government aircraft, Kumul 1, to fly along the border with Irian Jaya, praying that Papua New Guinea might be protected from outside evil influences. They also circumnavigated the entire country in a navy patrol boat, erecting a “prayer wall” while performing prophetic acts, and praying that God would release power in the heavenly realm to impact on the earthly realm and protect the nation from evil.³⁶ It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of such symbolic gestures because they are non-falsifiable, however, they were partly successful at least in their

political agenda. The participants and many in their churches feel that their prayers were heard when Papua New Guinea remained relatively calm while in the year 2000, two other Melanesian governments – in Fiji and the Solomons – fell into chaos after military coups.

In 2001 the same Christians were promoting “Operation Joshua”. Using images from Joshua in the Old Testament who challenged the gods of the original inhabitants of the “Promised Land” and conquered them, the Operation in Papua New Guinea is an attempt to assemble 50,000 people in rural, naval, urban and institutional teams to claim the land for God. The major part of the operation is to mobilise teams of young people to walk the length and breadth of the nation, “to claim the land for God”, so that the words of Psalm 33 will become a reality. “Blessed is the nation who’s God is the Lord.” The flyer advertising the operation shows a soldier holding a rifle standing astride a relief map of Papua New Guinea. Admittedly Joshua’s campaign was a military one and military metaphors appear in the New Testament (eg, Eph. 6:1-13; 2 Tim. 2:3-4). However one might question whether the military metaphor, portrayed almost like a modern military Crusade, could be distorted, especially during 2002, the year of the national elections.³⁷

Meanwhile Archbishop Barnes in public statements and a weekly radio program, continues to publicly raise issues like social cost of Poker machines, and the gaming industry, and calling on members of parliament to take pay cuts to express solidarity with the suffering of the people of the nation (*National* 19 April 2001, 1).

Other Catholic Bishops have been trying to ensure the political (not moral) neutrality of the Church in the lead up to the 2002 National elections. For example, Bishop Douglas Young of Mount Hagen has published detailed policies on the preservation of political neutrality, the promotion of a free vote, the avoiding of violence and support for the electoral commission. (See appendix). Bishop Young says that the declaration of neutrality was interpreted by various candidates, on the contrary, as implicit support for their opponents on the principle that whoever is not with me must be against me.

Conclusion

I began this paper by looking at the institutional links between socio-political institutions and religious institutions in Papua New Guinea. There is some degree of cooperation in the provision of services such as health and education, but often relations are strained, with the major churches wary of government attempts to control them. I then illustrated various ways that religious values and symbols are used, and often exploited to legitimise political aspirations and actions; such as the erection of a cross on the House of Parliament, and images of the “God-fearing politician” and of being “chosen” by God. On a national level I noted how recent developments in the break-down of law and order and the presence of Muslims has brought into question Christianity as an essential ingredient in Papua New Guinea national identity. Examples from Operation Brukim Skru and the outspoken comments by Archbishop Barnes have illustrated how Christian groups appear to be divided on whether it is better to respond to the current socio-political situation with a progressive social agenda or on the level of spiritual power.

Some of these attempts at using religion to gain political power have apparently worked and others not. There are two principal criteria for the selection of particular religious symbols or religious language: legitimation, and links with forms of “spiritual” power. In line with the

“effective power criterion” some politicians appear to have been successful in maintaining links with the perceived source of prosperity. Others have had less success in working with the tension between the intermingling of religion and politics and the separation of church and state. This is not made any easier by the great divergences in theological models among the churches themselves.

At the present time, in the wake of all the hype of dire predictions for the year 2000, and the general sense of mistrust of politicians, people from the grass-roots to the educated elite tend to make cynical comments on the future of the political process in Papua New Guinea in a feature article entitled, “The big smell,” the late Sir Anthony Siaguru published a cynical comment on the “Haus Tambaran” (House of Parliament), the source of politics as a “smelly business specialised in by the few for the few.” Likening voting to placing a bet, he went on to say, “What I suggest is that you keep a tight hold of your five kina and as the great election gets closer, ignore everything any politician has to say, and read and listen carefully to everything all the bishops have to say, and then take their advice about where to put your bet” (*Post-Courier* 1 June 2001, 11).

Colonel James Laki, writing about “Reconstructing a state in disarray” has come up with an equally disparaging image, “The political process resembles a tribal fight that destroys food gardens, houses, many valuable assets and then attempts to rebuild from virtually nothing. The affected group later regroups and pays revenge and so does the process of governing PNG, which may first conduct a witch-hunt and then unconsciously work towards the destruction of societal structure and promoting self-gratification. If the politicians could not see this beyond their EDF [Electoral Development Funds], the churches, the bishop’s conference and many others could” (*Post-Courier* 27 June 2001, 11).

These are powerfully negative expressions of the disillusionment felt today in the political process in Papua New Guinea.³⁸ The ritual performances of parliamentarians arriving at public events by helicopter because the roads are either too bad or too dangerous, and the televised reports of young women presenting dignitaries with floral necklaces, is becoming irksome to a public disillusioned by the political processes of the past and fearful of the future.

Charles Forman (p.30), noting the use of Christian national mottos in Samoa and Papua New Guinea, once asked whether the partnership between nationalism and Christianity “is laden with tensions or is harmonious, and whether Christianity is an independent and equal partner or is simply a pawn of nationalism.” This paper shows ample evidence of tension rather than harmony, and an occasional marriage of convenience between the various churches and the state.

A tension is inevitable also between the use of religion to gain political power and the use of religion to control power. Democratic principles are subject to control by a long history of association with Christian values. It is difficult for one to function without the other. Yet, both have been imported into Papua New Guinea, and now there is the struggle to find an appropriate balance. Will Christianity in Papua New Guinea become Melanesianised through being politicised?

Admittedly, some examples in this paper illustrate a devout, if simplistic, religious faith. Yet, political solutions to the growing spiral of violence and corruption have not worked and there is a general perception that politicians are dishonest and out to get what they can for themselves and their associates. Many politicians use religious rhetoric in their campaigns, however, during the 2002 elections many people could see through such thinly veiled attempts to seek to gain political power through association with Christian churches. Churches, recognising that religion has a political function in Papua New Guinea, have been entering into politics hoping that spiritual power will help control politics for good rather than evil. However, their position is sometimes compromised by their links with the political elite as a source of funds for internal church matters.³⁹ In the meantime the common people continue to search for security and prosperity in socio-political scene which becomes ever more complex.

Appendix A: Diocesan Policy on the National Election 2002 (Catholic Diocese of Mount Hagen)

Preservation of neutrality

- Church and church grounds, facilities, musical instruments, functions or celebrations may not be used for campaigning.
- School grounds or areas normally used for other public activities may be used if no other venue is available. This privilege must then be offered to ALL candidates who request it. If it is a building then some rent should be charged.
- A community that normally uses its fellowship house to discuss the affairs of the community may discuss election matters provided there is a clear break between the time of prayer and the election discussion.
- During the official campaign time, no intending candidate, not even a sitting member, may address people at a church function. Even before then, the community should be discouraged from inviting politicians to these functions. The Bishop might not come!
- No campaign posters may be displayed on church property.
- Our own statements and posters should be displayed prominently.
- Diocesan policy statements should be read at Mass and discussed at PPAB, KPAB meetings, with explanations as necessary.
- Priests need to be especially careful of their casual remarks and should never be seen to publicly favour one candidate over another.
- Priests and pastoral workers may open political meetings with a prayer if they are invited. This could be presented as our support for the democratic process rather than support for the candidate. They could use the "official" prayer provided by Caritas and use the opportunity to remind people in some way of the neutrality of the church.
- No church worker or Catholic community may solicit or accept political handout money for church activities. Any unsolicited donation of this nature should be diverted to infrastructure work.
- It is important that people understand the reasons for these guidelines and are able to give their wholehearted support to them.

Promotion of a free vote

- Educate people, especially youth, about democracy, Christian leadership, conscience, human rights and dignity, especially the rights and dignity of women.
- Emphasise that other people have the same rights as myself and their freedom, dignity, and consciousness must also be respected.
- Use our infrastructure to explain Electoral Commission material.
- Denounce bribery, vote buying and selling, coercion, and violence.
- Promote the exercise of the secret ballot and explain the reasons.
- Pray often for enlightenment and for strength to follow conscience.
- Encourage a national rather than tribal consciousness.

Avoiding violence

- **Don't accept money or gifts from intending candidates.**
- Educate about the high cost of violence (use drama)
- Use courts to settle disputes

- Pray for peace and promote a peaceful environment through peaceful behaviour in homilies and catechesis.

Support Electoral Commission

- Encourage honest registration on the common role.
- Participate in organising the conduct of the election, especially the provision of voting booths.
- The local community is the main security for electoral officials and the electoral process.
- Speak or write to intending candidates about commission and diocesan policies, especially regarding buying, selling votes.

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End notes:

¹ Candidates endorsed by the CDP won two seats in 1997, but the two MPs later defected to the People's Democratic Movement. *National* 10 October, 7.

² Problems in the government funding of church-run services prompted a strong editorial comment in the *National*, in which the writer says that the relationship between the government and churches "like most neglected relationships... is turning sour." See "Govt must strengthen ties with churches," *National*, 31 July 2000, 12. In 2001 the situation with wages improved, with funds being paid directly to the Churches Medical Council.

³ The Churches provide 45% of PNG health services (49% in rural areas). In 1998 the distribution of the 2301 church health worker positions was as follows: Catholic 44%, Lutheran, 10.7%, United 10%, ECPNG 8.6%, Nazarene 4.4%, Baptist 4%, Anglican 3%, SDA 3%, Gutnius Lutheran 2%, 16 other agencies 11% (Calculated from statistics from the PNG Dept. of Health Church Health Services, 1998). Church agencies administer 52% of community (primary) schools in PNG. The distribution of teachers in church agency community schools is as follows: Catholic 51.8%, Lutheran 17%, Evangelical Alliance 11.2%, United 10.7%, Anglican 5.3%, SDA 4%. (Calculated from Educational Statistics PNG, 1998)

⁴ In his tribute to the late Archbishop Hans Schwemmer at St Monica's Cathedral, Cairns (4 October 2001) the deputy Prime Minister of PNG, Michael Ogio said, "The relationship between Church and State in Papua New Guinea is not based on subservience – it is robust, not uncritical, but it is constructive, and it is mutually beneficial.... I can say, ...that relations between the Catholic Church and the Government of Papua New Guinea have never been in better shape...."

⁵ Word Publishing is owned by the Divine Word Missionaries (25%), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG (25%), the United Church (10%), the Anglican Church (10%) and the Catholic Dioceses of Goroka, Madang and Wewak (10% each).

⁶ 2000 Census Basic Tables, Provincial Level, North Solomons Province, Table A6. National Statistical Office, Port Moresby, 2002.

⁷ The "mainline" churches include the Lutheran, Catholic, Anglican and United Churches. The 2002 census figures show that 61% of PNG citizens belong to the mainline churches.

⁸ Figure calculated from various censuses' figures on citizen population in private dwellings released by the National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea.

⁹ See also papers in Christin Kocher Schmid, ed. *Expecting the Day of Wrath*, especially the papers by Yala, Brutti, and Stewart and Strathern.

¹⁰ The PNG parliament is *de jure* trilingual (English, Pidgin, Motu), but *de facto* bilingual (English, Pidgin). The Parliamentary Hansard is prepared in English, so the reader has access only to translations of the other two languages. (See Nekitel: 154.)

¹¹ As of 2001, the proposed bill still appeared in the Notice Papers before Parliament (2001) item 184.

¹² For a view see the report, "Churches sceptical about Bill" (*Post-Courier* 28 June 2000, 6).

¹³ Personal communication, Leo Kulumbu, NGO officer at the Dept. of Social Welfare and Development (Home Affairs) 9 October 2001.

¹⁴ Recorded at Yampu, 2 July 1997. Translated from the original Enga language.

¹⁵ Recorded at Wabag, 16 May 1997. Translated from the original Enga language.

¹⁶ Noted at Sari, 4 November 2000.

¹⁷ "Mr Skate said it took prayer to put him into the leadership as Prime Minister, and to form the government and "it will take more than a handful of greedy, power-hungry leaders to remove his government." Address at Morobe patrol station, commenting on Brukim Skru (*Independent* 4 June 1999, 30).

¹⁸ Recorded at Anditale, 9 June 1997. Translated from the Enga language.

¹⁹ According to the report in the *National* 3 May 1999, 1, the evangelist introduced Mr Skate as his "friend for life."

²⁰ See Rynkiewich: 18-22.

²¹ Sir Wiwa Korowi 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."

²² Bernard Narokobi published 45 short articles in the *Post-Courier* newspaper between 1976 and 1978. These articles were collected and edited by Henry Olela (an African), in a book titled *The Melanesian Way: Total Cosmic Vision of Life* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980).

²³ Michael Ogio in his Tribute to the Late Archbishop Hans Schwemmer, at St. Monica's Cathedral, Cairns, 4 October 2001.

²⁴ I note Stewart and Strathern's comment (1999:144) that, "In the End Times, prestations of pigs are being replaced by prestations of prayers, both to offset nightmares and to make dreams come true."

²⁵ On military values, see Trompf (p, 18). On Spiritual warfare, see Stritecky (2001).

²⁶ Governor Peter Ipatas has since been referred to the Public prosecutor for misconduct in office over at least a six year period. *Post Courier* 12 October 2004, 1.

²⁷ The difference of views is illustrated in comparing Narokobi's reference to the Kingdom of God as a kingdom of justice and righteousness in the Hansard for 18 July 2000, 23, with Napo's claim that Michael Ogio should blame Satan for the current misuse of resources in the Hansard for 29 May 2000, 13-14.

²⁸ The Salvation Army and some Baptist churches belong to both the PNGCC and the PNGEA. While the Evangelical Alliance includes 52 churches, missions, and church agencies it does not include the Independent Baptist churches and some Pentecostal churches like the Christian Revival Crusade (CRC) and Christian Outreach Center (COC).

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Conversation with Marlyn Stuckey in Mount Hagen, 2 May 1997.

³¹ 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.

³² The Seventh Day Adventist Church was the only one to publicly distance itself from the controversy. Pastor Bradley Kemp, Secretary of the PNG Union Mission wrote, "The Seventh Day Adventist Church says that while it is seriously concerned about the events that are taking place in the country, and the effects these were having on the lives of people, it is not prepared to enter into a debate on the continuation of the current government." (*Post-Courier* 7 April 1999, 2).

³³ In fact the number of Catholics decreased in the 1997 parliament, from 37 to 32.

³⁴ Extremist Seventh Day Adventist Church followers in Enga tried to disrupt the national year 2000 census, claiming that the census was being held in the name of evil to give people the number 666. *National* 22 May 2000, 3.

³⁵ Stewart and Strathern (2001:101) note how coalitions of leading men are beginning to infuse into the Charismatic Christian ritual cycle elements of "big-manship" reminiscent of the politics surrounding the *moka* exchange system of the past.

³⁶ Prophetic acts involve doing seemingly outrageous things "in obedience to God". For example, the Israelite soldiers marching around the city of Jericho in silence for six days and then with the Ark of the Lord on the seventh (Joshua 6:1-21). One of the many acts in PNG involved holding high a flag printed with the words "Jesus is Lord" during the entire flight along the PNG/Irian Jaya border. Personal Communication, Bob Brown, Port Moresby, 12 June 2000.

³⁷ Rick Love (p. 67) claims that "evangelicals have 'extended' the meaning of military metaphors beyond the intent of New Testament authors. See also Stritecky: 66-7.

³⁸ For example, a letter to the editor, entitled "What hypocrites we have," "...The citizens of this country prayed for God's blessing upon you three [Lafanama, Lak, and Ambane] that you will bail us out of all the problems that we now face. But you also have fallen into the devil's trap." *Post-Courier* 24 July 1997, 10.

³⁹ One should distinguish between funds for health care, education and church run social services, compared with "internal" matters such as church buildings, pastors' wages and evangelical campaigns.