

# State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

DISCUSSION PAPER

Discussion  
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## CHURCH AND STATE IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

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### INTRODUCTION

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Religion is a major part of Melanesian culture, especially in contrast with Western culture where an ethos of secularism and separation of religion from state is increasingly seen as normative. However, Western governments and nations such as Australia are now once again involved in Melanesia in way that could be characterised as “neo-colonial”, some twenty to thirty years after relinquishing colonial responsibility for countries such as Papua New Guinea. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in particular involves Australia and New Zealand in intervention in the Solomon Islands, which after the ethnic tensions of 1998-2003 came to be categorised as a “failing state.” Inevitably they bring into this environment the political and social philosophies and understandings of their own culture, and at times these are in significant variance from Melanesian culture.

Whilst one should be cautious in generalising about Melanesian culture, which is as varied as European or Asian cultures, there are some generalisations

that can be usefully made to guide thinking. One of these is that spiritual and religious aspects of life are far more obvious in the daily life of Melanesians than they are for Westerners. Additionally, it could be argued that in the Solomon Islands the only national institutions that command a loyalty and respect that transcend provincial and tribal boundaries are the churches and other organisations in civil society, and possibly the Solomon Islands Football Federation (SIFF – the national game is soccer). As a generalization, the churches command much more respect than government (White 2006, 6). The Western separation of religion and daily life, and subsequently the separation of Church and State, are not features of Melanesian culture. In the experience of the authors, whilst many academics and officials are aware of this (for example, the discussion by Nelson 2006, of the churches as an “alternate state”) others seem oblivious. For example the then Australian Deputy High Commission, Anita Butler, at the workshop *Solomon Islands: Where to now?* (Australian National University, 5th May 2006) made no references to the churches or religion in her discussion (admittedly brief) of the challenges in rebuilding the Solomons.<sup>1</sup>

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Therefore in this paper the relationship of Church and State in the Solomon Islands will be discussed, both historically, in the present context, and with a view to future involvement of the churches in governance. The role and position of the Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) of which both authors are ministers is especially relevant as it is the largest church in the Solomon Islands, and is the majority denomination in Isabel, Central and Temotu Provinces, with substantial minorities in the other provinces. Therefore observations about the Anglican Church, even where they are not applicable to other denominations, nevertheless have a broad application in Solomon Islands.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Often there is a tendency to think that formal colonisation was the first step in the process of Western Imperialism in the nineteenth century, followed by missionaries called in to support the imperial power. In Melanesia, as elsewhere, this is not the case. Formal annexation of the islands of Melanesia was the last step, and occurred well after missionary activity started in the islands. The Solomon Islands is a case in point: by the end of the 1880's large parts of the Solomons (such as Isabel and Gela) had largely been converted to Anglican Christianity, and the Anglicans and other missions were active in most of the other island groups of the Solomon Islands.

Before the establishment of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) in 1893 a power vacuum existed, as Christian conversions undermined the previous political structures. Warfare between tribes and clans was no longer an acceptable way of maintaining order, and in any event with the advent of firearms had become a far more dangerous practice. For the protection of their converts, the missions started to engage in forms of political governance. For example, there were moves to establish a "Parliament" on Nggela with the encouragement and superintendence of the Melanesian Mission in 1888 (White 1991, 184). The role of this "parliament" was to provide for some form of governance in the absence of any formal state, but it was a mixed success and

the establishment of the Protectorate was generally welcomed by the missions.

After the establishment of the Protectorate the missions generally cooperated with the BSIP administration and supported British rule (Hilliard 1978, 239), but there was also often some tension: the first Resident Commissioner (Charles Morris Woodford) was "wary of the activities of the Melanesian Mission" (Heath 1978, 202). At times this surfaced as competition for power. For example, through the Anglican Bishop of Melanesia the Catechists (village religious leaders) on Isabel complained about usurpation of the role of the Chiefs in 1921 (White 1991, 188), and the 1930's saw even greater competition. In 1929 the Revd Richard Fallowes was appointed as District Priest for Isabel. He appointed "Church Chiefs" for each village, who were soon at loggerheads with government appointed headmen. Lonsdale Gado was appointed as Paramount Chief by Fallowes for Isabel. Geoffrey White described the situation thus (White 1991, 191):

Gado became the church counterpart of the senior government headman Walter Notere. Given the rather unique situation in Santa Isabel of one church (Anglican) and one government for the entire island, the status of Gado and Notere constituted comparable positions of island-wide leadership, representing the separate but parallel institutions of church and state. Furthermore, each of these positions was linked to parallel (and at times intersecting) networks of village-level leaders (church chiefs and headmen).

Before World War II the "Chair and Rule" movement guided by Fallowes (modelled on the 1880's experimental "parliament" on Gela) caused tension for the BSIP Government, as it articulated the grievances of Solomon Islanders against the fairly haphazard British administration. The government eventually dealt with the problem by deporting Richard Fallowes.

The Pacific War had a great impact on the Solomons, and after the war Ma'asina Ruru (also known as the "Marching Rule" movement) arose, initially in Malaita, where it challenged British rule (Whiteman 1983, 250ff). Ma'asina Ruru was most active among

South Sea Evangelical Church adherents, whose expatriate leadership had fled before the Japanese invasion and therefore had less influence amongst its adherents (Whiteman 1983, 267-273). In contrast the Anglican Bishop and his staff had stayed in the islands with the British administration during the war, and exercised more control; the veteran Anglican missionary the Revd Dr. Charles Elliot Fox successfully prevented the spread of Ma'asina Ruru to Gela. These experiences increased the identification of the Anglican Melanesian Mission with the British administration.

However, this identification with the administration lessened during the twilight of colonial rule. The Anglican Church became increasingly indigenised and gained ecclesiastical independence from the Anglican Church of New Zealand in 1975, electing the first Melanesian Archbishop that same year (Whiteman 1983, 298-301). Today there are over 500 stipendiary clergy, with only three expatriates in active ministry. Similar developments took place in the Protestant denominations, though the Roman Catholic Church remains more tightly tied to overseas governance.

Importantly, the Churches began to hand over their education and health services to the colonial government. Previously the BSIP government had been content to leave education and health to the missions; but with increasing intervention in the 1950's and 1960's, accompanied by an ideology in Britain at the time which stressed the role of government in providing these services the BSIP administration took a greater interest in these areas. Consequently in the 1970's most of these services were handed over to the government; all Anglican schools with the exception of Selwyn College were transferred to the newly formed government Department of Education in 1975 (BSIP Government 1976a, 69, 118). As the colonial period came to an end, the departing British in consultation with a Constitutional Committee dominated by local politicians instituted a Westminster style of government, based on a report by a Constitutional Committee consisting of leading Solomon Islanders (BSIP Government 1976b).<sup>2</sup> The resulting constitution reflects the thinking of the Constitutional Committee and follows the model of Western, secular constitutions,

with only one passing reference to God in the preamble. The only other references to religion in the Constitution are found in Section 11, which is concerned with human rights such as freedom of conscience, but also permits the Churches to operate schools as long as they do not enforce religious observance.

## THE POST-COLONIAL ERA

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The formal structure of the new nation of the Solomon Islands, which was granted independence by the United Kingdom in 1978, was of a western style Westminster democracy. Since then it has been said that Solomon Island politicians have done little more than "tinker" with the political structures bequeathed by the British (Moore 2004, 90). However, whilst the formal structures are little changed, the relationship of Church and State has evolved, reflecting underlying culture rather than the imposed colonial structure.

In the period from 1978 to 1998 the churches tended not to be involved in politics, though individual pastors and priests often took elected office. However, there were two important developments. The first was that the churches ventured back into education: there was a clear feeling that leaving education to the secular authorities was not necessarily in the best interests of the churches, and that in terms of raising young people with a religious world view it was best if the churches ran their own schools (Zaku 2006, 75), albeit using a standard government approved curriculum. This has extended into significant involvement in the technical and tertiary education sector.

The second development was the formation of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA). As the churches matured and moved towards independence they also moved away from their traditional rivalry towards a more co-operative stance. SICA was formed in July 1967 (Bird 2007, 7), and is principally comprised of the five largest denominations in the Solomon Islands. At the 1999 Census (Solomon Islands Government 2000, Table B3.05, 158ff) the Anglican Church of Melanesia (then COM, now ACOM) was

counted as 33% of the population; the Catholic Church (19%); the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC) (17%); the United Church of the Solomon Islands (UCSI – formerly the Methodist Mission) (11%); and the Seventh-Day Adventists (SDA) (11%). The Churches have different historical origins – the Anglican Church is very much “high church” in character, stressing the sacraments and the role of the Priesthood in a similar way to the Catholic Church, and therefore contrasts with more protestant churches such as the UCSI, SSEC and SDA churches. The denominations also have different geographical concentrations – ACOM is dominant in Isabel, Central Province and Temotu with large populations in Malaita, Makira and Guadalcanal, whereas the UCSI is largely based in the west of the Solomon Islands. However, through SICA they work together with considerable effect on a number of issues, although in the experience of the authors the SDA are the least enthusiastic members of SICA, having a history of strained relationships with the other churches. In general SICA and the churches tend to steer clear of overt political involvement.

However, it is not unusual for ordained ministers to be involved in politics. For example, one of the authors of this paper was both an Anglican Priest, and a minister in the government of Solomon Mamaloni from 1995 to 1998. Whilst there is the odd individual in Australian politics who is an ordained minister, it is a little unusual and Australian politicians tend not to proclaim their religious convictions openly. However, in the Solomon Islands much of the political campaigning and machinations has a religious face, and politicians liberally invoke God and the Bible in support of their ambitions.

However, this is not the most significant aspect of the involvement of religion in the affairs of state in the Solomon Islands. Even in Western secular democracies religion is an element of politics, especially in the United States where the Christian right has significant political influence. Rather, it is the involvement of the Church at the “grass roots” or when governance fails, which gives the Churches a special role in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in Melanesia.

One of the authors, Fr Charles Brown Beu, has been active in politics at all levels,

especially in his home province of Temotu. The history of Temotu and the Anglican Church (which is the dominant church in the province) is intertwined: it was at Nukapu Island at the north of the Reef Islands that Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, first Bishop of Melanesia, was martyred in 1871 along with Joseph Atkins and Stephen Taroaniara. After being resistant to the Christian message, by World War II the islands of Temotu were largely Christianised, and specifically adopted an Anglo-Catholic or high church form of Anglicanism. This was important because of the emphasis in Anglo-Catholicism on the role of the priest. Before Christianity, the priest was a central figure in society, who could call on the spirits for healing, changing of weather patterns, and predicting the future. There was therefore a close relationship between the priests and the chiefs, and often the priests possessed more power than the chiefs, being the intermediary between the chiefs and the spiritual powers. Priests possessed *mana* (power) and this was power both in a religious and political sense.

With the advent of Anglican Christianity there has been a transfer of allegiance from the traditional priests to the Christian priest, and regardless of the finer points of Christian theology, the priest continues to have *mana* and an intermediary role between the people and God. Both authors in their role as priests have been called upon (as a matter of pastoral routine) to conduct healings and clearances (also known as exorcisms), both of which involve the exercise of *mana*. Related to this, in most communities the people give most of their trust and respect to the priest, and then to the chiefs, and behind them comes the politicians and government officials.

In addition to the direct exercise of religious functions, whenever there is a social or political problem in the village the council of chiefs would call the author (Brown Beu) for advice regarding the religious side of things before they take a decision. On the same note, whenever there is a political or social reconciliation the programme begins with a church service, usually the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. This would be followed by appropriate speeches by the chiefs and the priest, giving and receiving of compensation, exchange of gifts, and feasting and dancing. Typical of this pattern was a reconciliation ceremony involving the author (Brown Beu)

and his successor as Member of Parliament, Patteson Oti. The reconciliation was necessitated by intemperate and defamatory language used against Beu by Oti's campaign manager some years previous. The ceremony attracted nearly five thousand people and cost over twenty thousand Solomon dollars. Fr Brown Beu did not request the reconciliation ceremony – rather Patteson Oti did, as he attributed a number of misfortunes he had suffered to having wronged a priest.

This example shows the interaction of politics and religion, especially at the local level where there is much interaction between chiefs and priests. However, this interaction extends upwards. Priests are in a position of power at the local level, and that often extends into leadership at the political level. In 1991 Fr Brown Beu was elected into the national Parliament at a by-election after his predecessor was imprisoned for misconduct in office. He was then principal of a Rural Training Centre, and sought (and received) the blessing of his Bishop for this foray into politics. Later he became a cabinet minister in the government of Solomon Mamaloni, before leaving politics to resume a religious vocation in 1998. Other Temotuan priests have also achieved high office, particularly Fr (Sir) John Ini Lapli, who was Governor-General from 1999 to 2004.

This tradition of involvement of the Church at village level politics continues to this day: a custom that has arisen is Paramount chiefs where appointed in the Solomon Islands are usually blessed and inaugurated by the relevant Church; and often Paramount Chiefs hold important ecclesiastical office. For example Bishop Sir Dudley Tuti, one of the first indigenous Bishops in Melanesia and first Bishop of Ysabel following the independence of the Church of Melanesia, was installed as Paramount Chief of Isabel in 1975 (White 1991, 209ff). Indeed, this tradition continues – for example, the first part of the recent consecration of the new Anglican Bishop of Hanuato'o (which is coterminous with the province of Makira-Ulawa) included his installation as a Paramount Chief. This is more than just symbolic: the Bishop of the Central Solomons was reported in the *Solomon Star* newspaper ('Anglican Clerics step up anti-logging battle', 12 Dec 2005) as using his status as a Paramount Chief to help justify his ban on logging on Gela. In Isabel,

Tripod Governance (comprising the Tripod of Provincial Government, the Anglican Diocese of Ysabel and the Isabel Council of Chiefs) has been formalised by a Memorandum of Understanding (White 2006, 16), and claims precedents going back to 1885 before the declaration of the Protectorate.

### THE CHURCHES IN THE ETHNIC TENSION 1998-2003

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The involvement of the churches in secular activities in the post-colonial period perhaps became most apparent during the ethnic tension of 1998 to 2003 when the State started to break down and was unable to deliver even essential services such as law and order, education and health. At the start of the tension the churches did not become involved, seeing the deteriorating security situation as a matter for the national government. Initial responses by the churches to the crisis were dilatory and ineffective, and the "prophetic voice" which could have been used to condemn poor leaders who claimed to be good Christians was not heard (Zaku 2006, 66ff). Arguably, the churches still held to the late-colonial view that Church and State were separate spheres, and that it was not the role of the Church to become involved in the developing crisis of state authority.

However, inevitably the churches were pulled into the crisis. It was soon clear that the most effective deliverers of essential services, especially education and to a lesser extent health, were the churches. This was a reversion to a previous method of church activity from the missionary period. The Anglican Church was never strong in the provision of health services, but had always a big interest in education, and one of the best schools in the country is Selwyn College in north-west Guadalcanal. In comparison, the Seventh Day Adventists had a long history of involvement in health care and run an excellent hospital at Atoifi in Malaita. The services offered by the churches had been expanding since the handing over to Government of most of their public service facilities in the mid-1970s, and the churches now have extensive involvement in both secondary and tertiary education. During the tension, church controlled institutions

continued to be resourced and staff continued to be paid. Accordingly, there was continuous and effective provision of services by the churches.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, Government institutions such as schools, colleges and hospitals were badly affected through starvation of resources and non-payment of salary and fees by Government, resulting in strikes by staff and suspension of services (Moore 2004, 182).<sup>4</sup>

However, there was also more overt involvement in public affairs during the tension. The ordained clergy were often negotiators for peace and reconciliation, at all levels down to the village and family level. In the Anglican Church, both the Archbishop of Melanesia, Sir Ellison Pogo (from Isabel), and the Bishop of Malaita, Terry Brown (from Canada) were involved in facilitating negotiations between militant leaders and politicians, and in organising conferences and meetings such as the important workshop held at Dala Village in central Malaita in 2001 (Zaku 2006, 82). In particular, the Archbishop was involved in negotiations on behalf of both ACOM and the Solomon Islands Christian Association.

Perhaps the most visible involvement of senior clergy was in the more overt involvement of SICA and the churches in politics, in a way they had not been involved in the post-colonial period. A significant example of this politicisation was the opposition of SICA to the proposal by Prime Minister Sogavare to delay the elections due in late 2001, which resulted in Sogavare bitterly attacking SICA. But in the end, Sogavare was forced to back down and elections proceeded as scheduled (Fraenkel 2004, 130). SICA (and its constituent churches) continued to be involved as a significant civil society group as a party in political processes and in peacemaking and reconciliation efforts throughout the tension (Moore 2004, 152-153).

Whilst the average Solomon Islander may not have been overly aware of the work of the senior clergy, they were certainly aware of the work of the religious orders, especially the Melanesian Brothers who are part of the Anglican Church. The Melanesian Brothers are an indigenous religious order founded in 1925 by Ini Kopuria, an ex-policeman from Guadalcanal, and whilst Brothers are

committed to the three traditional promises of obedience, celibacy and poverty unlike the European model they do not take life vows. Typically, a Brother serves as a novice (trainee) for three to four years, and then three to seven years as a Brother before being released to return to a secular life. As a result the average Brother (known in Pijin as a *Tasiu*) is relatively young and fit, and it has proved a very successful movement, with about 400 *Tasiu* and novices currently serving in the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu, with most in Solomon Islands. The Brothers in their uniform of black and white are familiar figures in Solomon Islands, and often credited with *mana* (spiritual power). After release from the Brotherhood they usually go on to marriage and a leadership role in the village; many go onto secular or religious leadership roles at a higher level.

The *Tasiu* played a significant role during the tension in roles as diverse as rescuing hostages, disarmament, and delivery of food and supplies. The Anglican and Catholic sisters were also involved in this humanitarian work, and the religious orders and clergy were often the only people whose vehicles were allowed to cross unhindered between MEF and IFM positions outside Honiara. Indeed, the *Tasiu* camped in no-man's land, both in a literal and more figurative sense (Zaku 2006, 96),<sup>5</sup> and were often used as mediators. People turned to the *Tasiu* for protection (Zaku 2006, 100) and they risked their lives in their humanitarian work and mediation between the MEF and IFM (Moore 2004, 152). They were also involved in the rescue of prison officers isolated at Tetera in north-east Guadalcanal, and the rescue of Malaitans in north-west Guadalcanal.

Perhaps the most understated but significant contribution of the Clergy and Religious Orders, especially the *Tasiu*, was in the disarmament process. Such success as the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) achieved in disarmament is arguably largely due to the Brothers. In early 2001 an Anglican priest and a team of Brothers were assigned to the Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) set up in accordance with the TPA (Zaku 2004, 103). They claim that they were more successful than the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) in collecting weapons (Carter 2006, 74-75).

However, there were tensions between the religious orders and the militant groups. For example, the Melanesian Brothers were involved in confrontation with individual militants: Richard Carter (at that time Chaplain of the Melanesian Brotherhood) gives an account of a heated discussion in 2002 with key MEF leader Leslie Kwaiga over the issue of disarmament of militants (Carter 2006, 80-83). In bringing the message of peace the Brothers came to be at risk: it was on one such mission to Harold Keke on the Weathercoast in early 2003 that Brother Nathaniel Sado lost his life. Another six Brothers who then journeyed to the Weathercoast to recover the body were also tortured and murdered by men under Keke's command in April 2003, in one of the last atrocities of the tension.<sup>6</sup>

The humanitarian and peacekeeping role of the clergy and Religious Orders, especially the Melanesian Brothers, was probably the most high profile aspect of the involvement of the churches in more secular affairs during the tension. The role of the laity (especially women), both in support of the clergy and Religious Orders and as church communities and individuals motivated by ideals of Christian love, can be overlooked: but the laity also played a significant role (Zaku 2006, 104-108). In particular, significant local peacemaking and reconciliation was carried out by all the churches (Bird 2007, 12).

However, the churches also suffered. Individual clergy and religious order members were intimidated or kidnapped (Moore 2004, 152) or assaulted by militants (Carter 2006, 88-89) with MEF and IFM members responsible for intimidation and assaults. The IFM went further, with the murder in 2002 by Harold Keke of Fr Augustine Geve, a Catholic Priest who had become a Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister. This was followed by kidnapping of one group of Melanesian Brothers in 2003, and the murder of another group by Keke's military commander, Ronnie Cawa. The churches joined in the general acclamation of the intervention by RAMSI in 2003, and stepped back from direct involvement in the political process, with RAMSI taking responsibility for restoring law and order and enforcing disarmament. The churches were able to return to more comfortable ground, both theologically and politically, where they were disengaged from the direct political process

Following the April 2006 riots the churches became re-engaged for a short period in the political process. There was limited use of Melanesian Brothers as unarmed security guards, including a short stint at the Honiara Hotel, which harked back to a role they had in the tension when they guarded key points (such as the Governor-General's residence) in the absence of effective policing. However, more important was the relationship with the government led by Manasseh Sogavare that came to power after the riots.

On the one hand, Sogavare tried to enlist the support of the Churches; one attempt at doing this was "tithing" by Government. Tithing is a practice going back to Old Testament times (for example, the regulations in the Bible, in Numbers Chapter 18 or Deuteronomy Chapter 14), and it became the practice in many Christian churches (including those in the Solomon Islands) for believers to "tithe" or give one-tenth of their income to the church. Sogavare declared that the Government would also "tithe" its income, giving ten percent of its surplus to the Churches. Whilst this measure raised eyebrows among outside observers, it was not such an amazing concept to Solomon Islanders. This money was distributed through the Members of Parliaments to their constituencies; in the experience of the authors it would seem that the amount given to churches at the village level seems to have been about SBD \$2,500 for a year, though this amount varies considerably based on the number of persons in the village or parish, and other factors known only to the Honourable Member concerned.

The mainstream churches which form SICA have been lukewarm about tithing, but some of the smaller new fundamentalist churches have been keen on the idea. SICA is wary of the concept because of its potential for corrupting the churches, by making them dependent on Government funding. In practice, the two largest denominations (the Anglicans and Catholics) and also the Seventh-Day Adventists have reliable overseas sources of finance, and therefore are not as likely to become dependent on tithing by Government as other less-well resourced churches might. However the potential corruption remains, as local pastors and ministers take on responsibility for the use and distribution of these funds.

In practice, in spite of tithing, SICA had become a vocal critic of much that the Sogavare government was doing, which harks back a little to its role at the time of the previous Sogavare government. For example, it opposed the rearmament of the Solomon Islands Police (Bird 2007, 8), and the appointment of Julian Moti as Attorney-General, and was critical in other ways of the government leading to a fairly bitter attack on SICA by Sogavare, with the Solomon Islands Government issuing a press release on 20 November 2007 titled 'PM Sogavare Calls On SICA To Stay Out Off Politics' [sic].<sup>7</sup> With the fall of the Sogavare government in December 2007 and its replacement by a government led by Dr Derek Sikua (an Anglican from north-east Guadalcanal, and known to the authors through church links) there has been a lessening of the tension between SICA and the Government, and the churches have once again stepped back from open political involvement.

However, Governments in the Solomon Islands are fragile, and as the second Sogavare government showed, the former militants and associated power brokers are far from spent. Political instability is still a possibility (perhaps even a probability) in the Solomon Islands. Therefore SICA and the churches remain key players. Therefore we must consider possible models of future involvement of the Churches in politics and government in the Solomon Islands.

## **CHURCH, STATE AND EXTERNAL AGENCIES**

The churches are very important at the "grass roots" level in the villages, where the vast majority of Solomon Islanders still live<sup>8</sup>, and from where nearly all Solomon Islanders obtain their sense of identity and place. This accounts partly for the strength of religion in Solomon Island and Melanesian life – religion is not just a matter of spirituality, but also central to personal and communal identity. Additionally, of course, the power structures in the village level are usually also located in the organisational structures of the Church – the "big men" at the village level are usually also identified with the Church as Elders, or senior members of vestry committees, or Catechists or clergy.

At the national level, the churches are important political players, and as discussed have acted to frustrate or hinder Government policies. Likewise the general support of the churches for RAMSI has, at the least, been helpful for RAMSI in establishing and maintaining its legitimacy and popularity with the general population.

We should not overestimate the political strength of the churches – it is doubtful that they are in a position to impose policy or dictate terms to government. Corruption, which is hardly a Christian virtue, continues to be a key factor in governance. Furthermore, the churches have no desire to impose a "theocracy" on the Solomon Islands, and do not have the unity or strength to do so. Unlike Fiji and some other Pacific countries, there is no one denomination that commands the allegiance of the majority of Christians. On the other hand, they do have the strength, and on occasions the will, to successfully resist or oppose Government, and have a long history of doing so back to the early days of the Protectorate.

It is important to understand the nuances of the religious values that underpin Melanesian Christianity. The theological approach described here is particularly Anglican, but would also be shared in general with the other major denominations, especially the Catholics and the UCSI. Religion should not be seen as "other-worldly". The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus was not just a Kingdom in Heaven, but also a Kingdom to be brought into the present world through teaching and healing and sharing. Most Westerners are exposed to American-style evangelism, in which Christianity is understood as being primarily a matter of individual conversion, or "accepting Jesus as your personal saviour". This is not the case with Anglican or other mainline Christian churches in Solomon Islands. Christianity is vitally concerned with community. Therefore Christianity should be practiced corporately and as a community, and Christian values are not to be privatised but shared in the community. Accordingly the churches will take an interest in more worldly matters, and actively be involved in areas such as health care and education. On the other hand, they do not want to be government: the churches are not called upon to rule the world. Theocracy is a mistake. Unlike other

Pacific countries (such as Fiji) the churches as organised bodies tend to shy away from overt political involvement if possible, but will become involved if they see it as important to their mission of bringing peace and healing or for preventing gross injustice.

One question therefore that arises is the future relationship of Government to the churches. The churches will not want to govern, or be cast in the role of Opposition. However, the churches will continue to be involved in the provision of services, and will continue to expand in that sphere. For example, both the Anglican and SDA churches have advanced plans, with the moral and promised financial support of the government, for the building of universities in or near Honiara, which will further their involvement in tertiary education.

Such involvement in provision of services will inevitably bring the churches into sustained contact, and even partnership, not only with government but also with aid donors and external agencies. Donor partners have recognised that the churches are an effective deliverer of services, and are increasingly involved in partnership arrangements. There are now many buildings in Solomon Islands that have been built largely by funding from donors such as AusAID and the EU which are run and operated by the churches. These include schools, hospitals, and even rest houses. For example, there is a particularly fine rest house at Tulagi operated by the Mothers Union of the Anglican Church, which was built largely with AusAID funds. Indeed, the last time Dr Joseph visited Tulagi in 2005 the AusAID sign was very prominent on the front of the building.

This involvement does give rise to interesting ethical issues. In general, aid donors are representatives of secular governments and institutions, and therefore steer clear of overt religious involvement. However, by channeling support through the churches and church leaders, they inevitably give support to religious organisations. Whilst the aid donors (quite rightly) will not fund church buildings, the buildings and projects they do fund often do work to the support of churches. For example, the Mothers Union rest house at Tulagi discussed above is operated by the Mothers Union, and any profits will go to the Mothers Union, and be

used for a variety of purposes, some of which are clearly religious. If a donor provides funding for a school house in a village, it will probably be used for religious education as well as secular education; indeed, it may even be used as a church building on some occasions. Clearly donor partnership with churches will involve activities which support the churches, even if only because there is no clear distinction between religious and secular activities. Assistance in the secular field (especially at the local level) inevitably will be channeled by the local community into a number of activities on which local identity is based, and which will include religious activities.

One area in which external agencies have become involved is reconciliation and the restoration of peace (Bird 2007, 11ff). Clearly in this type of area the churches are motivated by their basic values and mission, and use those values in order to promote reconciliation and peace. External agencies becoming involved in supporting this type of work are of necessity involved in supporting, at the least, the use of those religious values in support of peace and reconciliation.

Clearly the churches are seen as being effective deliverers of services, and hence external agencies that may usually have reservations about supporting churches are willing to support them in spite of any qualms over the above issues. It also points out that for the foreseeable future one of the major roles of the churches, at least in the eyes of external agencies, is the delivery of public sector services, and in healing some of the wounds related to the tension. In these areas the churches can be seen as having a better capacity than government, or at the least a capacity that effectively supplements the work of government.

This foreshadows another issue – “what if” effective government collapses? The Solomon Islands came close to this during the ethnic tension, and in the absence of RAMSI would certainly tend to anarchy. Arguably Papua New Guinea faces similar problems of possible disintegration. In the absence of effective governance, the churches may fill the vacuum, and move from the delivery of services to the delivery of government. There are certainly historical precedents for this, in the pre-colonial period.

However, as discussed above the churches certainly do not see themselves in the role of an “alternative government”, and are ill-prepared for this role. It is simply not part of the mission of the church. It is one thing to deliver services such as education or health in the absence of government, or even to conduct disarmament missions and peace and reconciliation missions when government is failing. But it is quite another matter to assume government, and not something that the churches would contemplate or want to undertake.

## CONCLUSION

The late colonial paradigm of separation of Church and State which was imposed on the emerging nations of Melanesia has not reflected reality. Both culture and history show that religion and government are intertwined. The greater effectiveness of the churches in delivering both identity and services to the people is reflected in the confidence and authority that the people give to the churches, but do not give to government.

External agencies need to be aware of this, and should not approach governance in Solomon Islands with the preconception that church and state can be separated. Additionally, those seeking to aid or intervene in Melanesia need to understand the religious value system that underlies public discourse and be aware that involvement with the churches will also involve them, willing or otherwise, in the religious value systems of those churches. Otherwise, they will be limited in their effectiveness in delivering their message and services to the people of Melanesia, or in reforming the institutions of government. In particular, for the foreseeable future, external agencies will find that the churches are effective organisations in the delivery of all sorts of services that would normally be considered the primary responsibility of government.

## AUTHOR NOTES

Both authors are Anglican Priests, working at the Bishop Patteson Theological College on Guadalcanal, which is the major seminary of the Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM). However, the views expressed in this paper should not be taken as representing the position of ACOM.

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## ENDNOTES

1. In the experience of the authors, Australian government officials at lower levels often (but not always) show a baffling insensitivity to the role of religion or *lotu*. On one occasion Dr Joseph was asked by a RAMSI official organizing a public Christmas Carol concert if it was a good idea to include prayers – to the average Solomon Islander it would have been incomprehensible not to have prayers on such an occasion.
2. Of the twenty-three members of the Constitutional Committee, one was a clergyman (the Anglican Archbishop of Melanesia) representing the Solomon Islands Christian Association. Eight organisations made written submissions,

including the Christian Fellowship Church and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (Appendix 3 of the report); presumably the other churches felt that their interests were adequately represented by the Archbishop. There are no significant references in the Report to religion; it is a thoroughly secular document.

3. A limited exception to this was where services were suspended due to action by militants, or fear of action by militants. For example, Selwyn College and the Bishop Patteson Theological College, both of which are in rural north-west Guadalcanal, suspended their classes for the second half of 2000, resuming the following year. However, in this and similar cases the cause for disruption to services was not inability by the churches to deliver the services, but intervention by external actors.
4. One side effect of this since the tension have been attempts by cash-strapped provincial governments to hand back schools to the churches, and a willingness of churches to take them, for reasons including concerns about declining moral standards. In particular, fifty schools were handed back to UCSI in 2005 (Bird 2007, 11) – one imagines that a similar event in Australia would provoke condemnation rather than congratulations.
5. The most renowned literal instance of the Brothers being in 'no-mans land' was when the *Tasiu* camped on the bridge at Alligator Creek between the MEF and IFM positions.
6. Ronnie Cawa and others were subsequently imprisoned for life for these murders, in October 2005.
7. <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0711/S00838.htm>
8. There has been a significant movement of people in and out of Honiara since the last census, but at a rough estimate about 65,000 people (or 15% of the population) either live permanently or temporarily in Honiara, 5% are in other urban centres such as Gizo and Auki, and 80% still live in small villages.

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