

‘A Calling From God’: Being Political in the Pacific Islands.

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‘A Calling From God’: Politicians and Religiosity in the Pacific Islands

Despite its relative absence from much of the literature on politics in the Pacific region, religiosity is an assumed and often unchallenged component of political life. Drawing from more than 100 in-depth biographical interviews with politicians, around 40 published life histories and other publically available material, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s concept ‘habitus’ to explore how politicians see the role of faith and religious association contributing to their public profile, election campaigning, representative and legislative functions, and ‘inner’ life. I advance two arguments: firstly, that ideal analytic distinctions like state, society and religion become problematic in the Pacific Islands where political leaders tend to occupy multiple roles and assume overlapping identities; and, secondly, that despite the overwhelming religiosity seemingly apparent in public rhetoric, secularisation is an effervescent narrative across the region with politicians vocal protagonists on all sides of this debate.

Keywords: Pacific Islands, secularisation, religiosity, habitus, practice.

Introduction

Too many strange things have happened in my life to be coincidental. Something controls what I do ... God is by my side. I can feel it always ... I have been prepared to stand for the Parliament of my country. A big dream for a small girl hunting fish in a blue lagoon on an island adrift in time.¹

It is commonplace in both academic analysis and popular commentary about politics and political leadership in the Pacific Islands to cast the state, usually defined as a set of Weberian legal-rational institutions, and society, synonymous with terms like culture and tradition, as opposed entities. Ideal analytic categorisations that, when framed by development discourse and its commitment to modernist imperatives, provide a structured account of why the institutions and processes of government do not ostensibly appear to mirror those apparent in so-called ‘western’ nation-states. Religion holds an ambiguous place in this discussion, variously characterised as an introduced modern entity and a bastion of

¹ Josephine Abaijah, *A Thousand Coloured Dreams: The Story of a Young Girl Growing up in Papua*, (Melbourne: Dellasta Pacific, 1991): 175.

tradition and culture. Congruent with Thomas Jefferson's famous edict on the separation of church and state,² the legal-rational model largely presumes a version of the secularisation thesis 'where theological superstitions, symbolic liturgical rituals, and sacred practices ... will be out grown in the modern era'.³ In contrast, religiosity is an orthodox and often taken-for-granted component of Pacific identity and by extension political life.

Attending a dedication ceremony shortly after being sworn in as Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Sato Kilman was quoted in the *Vanuatu Daily Post* as saying that responsibility for health and education policy should be given back to the nation's churches so that they could instil the word of god in young children.⁴ The following month he was again quoted warning that Vanuatu could become godless, citing the inability of young people to find the book of Leviticus in the bible.⁵ Similarly, prominent Fijian businessman, former Cabinet Minister and, prior to the 2006 coup, Senator by appointment of the Great Council of Chiefs, Sir James Ah Koy, warned that a mistranslation of the word *Kalougata*⁶ in the Fijian bible had cursed present day indigenous Fijians, causing 'coups, murders, rapes, violence, brutality, burglaries, incest, rebellion, homosexuality and other forms of social ills and criminality'.⁷ Ah Koy has since personally funded the retranslation and distribution of new bibles with the offending word replaced.

Political leaders in the Pacific Islands are not alone in expressing such sentiment.

Indeed, the use of religious rhetoric by politicians across the world is attracting increased

² For discussion see Richard Samuelson, 'Jefferson and Religion: Private Belief, Public Policy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Collections Online, 2009).

³ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehardt, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 3.

⁴ Vanuatu Daily Post, 8/12/2010, <http://www.dailypost.vu/content/some-services-return-churches-pm-kilman>.

⁵ Vanuatu Daily Post, 27/1/2011 <http://www.dailypost.vu/content/vanuatu-danger-sliding-godless-society-kilman>.

⁶ *Kalougata* is commonly understood to mean 'blessing' but the recently contested view is that the appropriate translation is 'snake god'. For more details see <http://ahkoy.com/>.

⁷ Radio New Zealand International 11/5/2005, <http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=16679>.

scholarly attention, especially in the United States, although it has historically been neglected.⁸ In this article I am less interested in the nature and impact of public appeals to religious ideals and more concerned with understanding how personal or private faith and religious association inform the ways politicians make sense of everyday political life. Using the methodological tools of the narrative or interpretive turn in social science research,⁹ I draw from more than 100 in-depth biographical interviews with national-level politicians, around 40 published life histories and other publically available material - including regional magazines *Pacific Islands Monthly* (PIM) and *Islands Business* (IB) - and observation-based research to explore how politicians see the role of faith and religious association as contributing to their public profile, election campaigning, representative and legislative functions, and ‘inner’ life.¹⁰

Not that all politicians in the Pacific Island are pious - some reject religious associations and belief systems out of hand. And, while Christianity is the dominant religion in the region, it is not the only one, particularly in multi-racial Fiji. Moreover, it is important to recognise that some politicians experience a continued relationship with indigenous forms

⁸ See John Keane, 'Secularism?', *The Political Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2000): 5–19, 2. Kenneth D. Wald and Clyde Wilcox, 'Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?', *The American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (2006): 523-9. Elizabeth A. Oldmixon and William Hudson, 'When Church Teachings and Policy Commitments Collide: Perspectives on Catholics in the U.S. House of Representatives', *Politics and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2008): 113-36.

⁹ Dovra Yanow, 'Qualitative-Interpretive Methods in Policy Research', in *Handbook of Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics and Methods*, eds. Frank Fischer, Gerald J. Miller, and Mara S. Sidney (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2007).

¹⁰ This material was collected in Samoa, Fiji, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Kiribati and Nauru and with retired or transiting politicians in Australia and New Zealand. And while broadly covering the region, this portrait relies on the experience of post-independence leaders, and politicians from Melanesia and Fiji in particular, partly reflecting the availability of written life histories. Congruent with the emphasis on reflexivity in interpretive research, in many interviews, discussion about faith and religion was initiated by the interviewee who asked ‘Are you a Christian?’ My affirmative response was usually welcomed and in some cases enhanced reflection. Conversely, in other instances it stymied conversation with interviewees responding ‘Well you understand then’.

of spirituality,¹¹ as the following quote by former Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Albert Maori Kiki illustrates:

... Christianity never came to mean anything to me. I was more deeply impressed by what my mother had taught me when I was young than by this later teaching. To this day talking to a river or to a tree is far more important to me than sitting down and listening to somebody else talking about God.¹²

Conversely, while Kiki explicitly rejects Christian beliefs, others seek reconciliation between what Samoa's Head of State and former Prime Minister, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi calls his Christian (Catholic) reference and his indigenous Samoan reference.¹³ However, these caveats aside, Christianity is the most observable pattern and is therefore my main focus here.

By illustrating the influence that faith and religion have in the lives of many politicians, and by extension the everyday practice of politics, I advance two arguments: firstly, that ideal analytic distinctions like state, society and religion become problematic in the Pacific Islands where political leaders tend to occupy multiple roles and assume overlapping identities.¹⁴ Consequently, conventional accounts tend not to recognise the extent

¹¹ The pan-Pacific term *Mana* is often used to describe pre-Christian beliefs in supernatural power and influence, see Robert. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folk-Lore*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969 [1891]):118. For discussion see Matthew Tomlinson, *In God's Image: The Metaculture of Fijian Christianity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 21. In addition, there is a body of literature on the proliferation of Cargo Cults, particularly in Melanesia, see Ron Crocombe, *The South Pacific*, 7th ed. (Suva, Fiji: IPS Publications, University of the South Pacific, 2008): 184-186. In parts of the Pacific practices described as witchcraft, magic and sorcery are also not uncommon, for examples of their impact on public policy see Nicole Haley, 'Witchcraft, Torture and Hiv', in *Civic Insecurity: Law, Order and Hiv in Papua New Guinea*, eds. Vicki Luker and Sinclair Dinnen (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010).

¹² Albert. M. Kiki, *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime, a New Guinea Autobiography*, (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1968): 59.

¹³ Tamasa'ilau M. Suaalii-Sauni, I'uogafa Tuagalu, Tofilau Nina Kirifi-Alai, 'Introduction', in Tamasa'ilau M. Suaalii-Sauni, I'uogafa Tuagalu, Tofilau Nina Kirifi-Alai and Naomi Fuamatu ed., *In Search of Fragrance : Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi and the Samoan Indigenous Reference* (Samoa: Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa, 2009): 6.

¹⁴ See also Jack Corbett, "Two Worlds?' Interpreting Leadership Narratives in the 20th Century Pacific', *Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 1 (2012): 69-91.

to which individuals move between polemics, negotiate tensions and ameliorate conflicts; and secondly, despite the overwhelming religiosity seemingly apparent in public rhetoric, secularisation is an effervescent narrative across the region with politicians' vocal protagonists on all sides of this debate.

To explore the ways that politician's disposition towards religion frames their life world, and by extension the everyday practice of politics in the Pacific Islands, I employ Pierre Bourdieu's term 'habitus'. 'Habitus' is a term used by Bourdieu to capture how people only act against the background of the contexts that influence them.¹⁵ As a contribution to the long-standing structure-agency debate in social theory, it is used in conjunction with the term 'field' - the objective network or configuration of relations to be found in any social space or particular context - to convey an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society.¹⁶ By focusing on the meanings and beliefs that politicians ascribe to their faith, this article is specifically interested in the 'subjective element of practice'. And as such, while I make every attempt to locate reflections in the context within which they are embedded, conventional comparative analysis between nation-states or cultural regions is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, while there are differences between individual leaders, denominations, countries and regions, this article predominantly focuses on similarities.¹⁷

In line with the conventions of interpretive research, my objective is to provide enough information for the reader to feel convinced that I am depicting the shared experience of political people rather than finding information to support a specific hypothesis.¹⁸

¹⁵ Karl Maton, 'Habitus', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008): 50-52.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For a more conventional comparative study of religious association between Pacific Island countries see Manfred Ernst, ed., *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands* (Suva, Fiji: The Pacific Theological College, 2006).

¹⁸ Grant Reeher, *First Person Political*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006): 23. For examples of similar studies of political leaders see: Rod A. W Rhodes, *Everyday Life in British Government*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Anne

Consequently, where possible I use extensive quotations, to provide a sense of the politicians' voice. However, this voice is ultimately constructed by me and as such represents patterns that I have identified as emerging from the collected information. Following Ann Chih Lin, I have sought, as far as possible, to highlight the circumstances under which generalisations hold.¹⁹ In particular, I have generally included the country from which the politician quoted is from. However, as interviews were granted upon my stated commitment not to use names in any publications, and as far as possible suppress the identity of the interviewee, this was not always possible.²⁰ Quotes have primarily been selected on the basis of their succinctness and were chosen from a series of responses that demonstrated a similar point; in most cases each quote could have been substituted for several others.

Politics in the Pacific Islands

The Pacific Islands or the South West Pacific region is commonly split into the three sub-regions which for the purposes of this article include independent and self-governing countries in: Melanesia (Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), Polynesia (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu), and Micronesia (Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau).²¹ The focus of this article on a specific region draws from the logic of area studies. The promise of area studies, as opposed to a single country study, or surveys of larger numbers of countries, is that shared history, geography, languages and religion are likely to affect the pattern of politics in similar

Tiernan and Patrick Weller, *Learning to Be a Minister: Heroic Expectations, Practical Realities*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Ann. C Lin, 'Bridging Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to Qualitative Methods', *Policy Studies Journal* 26, no. 1 (1998): 162-80.

²⁰ In the case of female politicians, for example, nominating their country would make them easily identifiable. In addition, while I have endeavoured to remain faithful to the integrity of what a politician has said during an interview, clarity and conciseness demanded a degree of editing, with such instances clearly identified using the standard methods. In the case of published life histories, conventional referencing rules have been applied.

²¹ For discussion see Nicholas Thomas, 'The Force of Ethnology', *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (1989): 27-41.

ways.²² In particular, despite the often cited cultural and linguistic diversity of the region, the similarity of experiences across the countries represented in this article echoes Epeli Hau'ofa's description of growing cultural homogeneity amongst the region's political classes.²³ His view of this new 'Pacific society' presents politicians as defined by their essential likeness, including a shared regional culture (synonymous with terms like the 'Pacific Way'), language (English), ideologies (development) and material lifestyles (urbanised). Following Bourdieu, I do not deny that each life course is distinctive but rather illustrate how at the same time lives share structures with others, including those most relevant here: occupation and religion.²⁴ Consequently, while 'habitus' is clearly not formed in social isolation,²⁵ by placing the politician, rather than culture or the state, at the centre of my analysis, I seek to highlight how elite practice is influenced by prevailing cultural and institutional norms, whilst simultaneously challenging and recreating them to reflect rapidly changing societal 'fields'.²⁶

While ostensibly focused on the meanings and experiences of the political class, several other prominent features of political life in the Pacific Islands are important to this article. Aside from their relatively small size, the mix of contemporary state-based institutions in the Pacific are more diverse than any other equivalent population in the world.²⁷ Westminster is the most common parliamentary system but the Pacific also has a Presidential system and hybrids of the two. The size of legislatures also varies considerably, (FSM's Congress has 14 members whilst PNG's Parliament has 109). Fiji's pre-2006

²² Peter Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012): 7.

²³ Epeli Hau'ofa, 'The New South Pacific Society: Integration and Independence', in *Class and Culture in the Pacific*, eds. Antony Hooper et al. (Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific and Centre for Pacific Studies of the University of Auckland, 1987): 3.

²⁴ Maton, 'Habitus': 53.

²⁵ Roxana Waterson, 'Enduring Landscape, Changing Habitus: The Sa'dan Toraja of Sulawesi', in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, eds. Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby 2nd ed. (Ashgate, 2005): 337.

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Habitus', *ibid*: 47.

²⁷ Crocombe, *The South Pacific*: 379.

Parliament and Palau's Congress are bicameral; many others have constitutionally mandated councils reserved for chiefs and traditional leaders - until recently the majority of seats in Tonga's Legislative Assembly were reserved for nobles - while assorted types of state, provincial and local government assemblies add to this somewhat eclectic mix of institutional frameworks. Furthermore, reflecting the diversity of political institutions in the Pacific Islands, electoral systems are similarly varied.²⁸

The diversity of contemporary democratic institutions also overlays forms of political organisations commonly described as 'traditional'. The most influential anthropological study of political authority in the region is Marshall Sahlins' distinction between the achieved leadership of the Melanesian 'Big Men' and ascribed leadership of Polynesian 'Chiefs'.²⁹ Despite consistent critique,³⁰ the influence of tradition or culture on politics remains a perpetual theme in the Pacific. So far, the main challenge to this culturalist interpretation of leadership dynamics comes from political economists and rational-choice theory, highlighting the contribution of this article.

The relative absence of influential political parties with broad-based ideological support is another prominent feature of post-independence democratic politics in the region. Prior to 2006, Fiji had a relatively strong two-party system, although differences are largely based on ethnic cleavages (Indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian). In most other Pacific Island countries political parties have limited influence - many have none at all. There are two main exceptions to this trend. Political parties were relatively prominent around independence.³¹ However, over the last two decades coalitions have tended to rise and fall on the strength of

²⁸ Stephen Levine, ed., *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Marshall D. Sahlins, 'Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 285-303.

³⁰ For review see Mark. S Mosko, 'The Making of Chiefs: 'Hereditary Succession', Personal Agency and Exchange in North Mekeo Cheifdoms', in *The Scope of Anthropology*, eds. Laurent Dousset and Serge Tcherkezoff (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

³¹ Some of the major independence parties remain: *Vanua'aku Pati* in Vanuatu and the *Pangu Pati* in PNG, for example.

their leaders rather than by mobilising mass support around socio-political cleavages.³² The second exception is Samoa where the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) has enjoyed relatively uninterrupted power for thirty years.³³ Nevertheless, even in periods and places where political parties exert relatively greater influence, personalisation and localisation are key descriptive themes in the literature on politics in the Pacific Islands.

Finally, the percentage of women elected to parliament in the Pacific Islands is amongst the lowest in the world. Culture, both traditional and Christian, is one commonly cited inhibiting factor, but the costs of elections are also considered restrictive. This trend has generated significant discussion, especially as in some instances female representation is declining, defying conventional wisdom and the growing number of women holding senior positions in other sectors.³⁴ The relative absence of women in Pacific Island parliaments has also attracted significant donor interest with numerous programs designed to train female candidates, with positive discrimination measures, including reserved seats, under consideration in a number of countries.³⁵

³² For discussion see Roland Rich, Luke Hambly, and Michael Morgan, eds., *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU E Press., 2008).

³³ Asofou So'o and Jon Fraenkel, 'The Role of Ballot Chiefs (Matai Palota) and Political Parties in Samoa's Shift to Universal Suffrage', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 43, no. 3 (2005): 333-61, So'o, 'The Establishment and Operation of Samoa's Political Party System', in *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*, eds. Rich, Hambly, and Morgan (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008).

³⁴ See Asenati Liki Chan Tung, 'Women Leaders in Solomon Islands Public Service: A Personal and Scholarly Reflection', *State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*, no. 1 (2010), 2. Fraenkel, 'The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments', in *Book The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Pacific Parliaments*, (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat by the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development & Governance, 2006). Elise Huffer, 'Desk Review of the Factors Which Enable and Constrain the Advancement of Women's Political Representation in Forum Island Countries', in *Book Desk Review of the Factors Which Enable and Constrain the Advancement of Women's Political Representation in Forum Island Countries*, (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2006).

³⁵ So far, only the Autonomous Government of Bougainville has three reserved seats for women in its 39 member parliament.

Building a Profile and Reputation

The Church was very influential in getting [me] in ... Because we got to travel to other islands ... Even in Tarawa we conducted so many workshops for the youths and Sunday school teachers ... that was part of my influence. I didn't think of [it] at that time, it was my spiritual development personally, [but] I found that it helped.

[I-Kiribati politician]

A significant proportion of the literature on electoral politics in the Pacific Islands is concerned with electoral systems, ethnic voting, and the persistence of 'traditional' norms in 'modern' democratic institutions.³⁶ The role of the church is often relatively absent from this analysis.³⁷ There are a number of possible explanations for this - a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article - including the dominant secularism of the academy and international donors, and the implicit or assumed relevance of Christianity to many Pacific Islanders. While I do not wish to dismiss the significance of factors like culture, ethnicity or institutional design, I begin this article by illustrating how and why religious association also matters. Specifically, I maintain that to understand how religion informs politicians' 'habitus', we must appreciate its significance to the political 'game'.³⁸

All politicians need an audience and in the Pacific Islands religious services and events are one of the main forums where communities come together. In a radio interview with Ian Johnstone, former Premier of Niue, Young Vivian, himself a preacher, claimed that

³⁶ For review see Fraenkel, 'Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions', in *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Levine (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009).

³⁷ Bronwyn Douglas, 'Christianity, Tradition, and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia', *Oceania* 74, no. 1/2 (2003): 6-21. Ernst, ed., *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*. Richard Eves, 'Cultivating Christian Civil Society: Fundamentalist Christianity, Politics and Governance in Papua New Guinea', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Papers*, no. 8 (2008). Crocombe, *The South Pacific*: 191-196. Keith Joseph and Charles. B. Beu, 'Church and State in Solomon Islands', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*, no. 11 (2008). Phillip Gibbs, 'Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Church and State in Papua New Guinea', *SSGM Working Paper* 1 (2005).

³⁸ Jean Hillier, 'Mind the Gap', in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, eds. Hillier and Rooksby 2nd ed. (Ashgate, 2005): 164.

most of the people elected to Niue's Assembly are church people.³⁹ And, while dynamics can vary spatially and temporally, simultaneity between religious and political life is a commonly repeated theme by politicians across the region. Many politicians occupy church leadership positions, including as deacons and elders, and actively participate as lay preachers. Moreover, these types of affiliations are not the exclusive domain of Christians. For example, former leader of the National Federation Party (NFP), A.D. Patel, had an active role in numerous organisations, including the *Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam*, a cultural association for South Indians.⁴⁰

One interpretation of this relationship is expediency, as Ari Pedro Oro also finds in his analysis of 'religious politicians' in Southern Brazil,⁴¹ leaders often consciously harmonise their religious practices with their constituency, thereby accruing what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic capital', as the following quote demonstrates:

As a politician you have got to strategise, you have got to do your homework ... You attend church on Sundays. You are seen. You attend family gatherings, funerals and that, and you are active in it ... That's all part [of it].

[Samoan politician]

Conversely, the Pacific experience also highlights that it is often on the basis of their involvement in organisations like churches that constituents and community leaders approach them to run:

[The pastors] said that if you decide to do so we will use our existing network to educate the members of our church to vote for you. Automatically, I knew that I was going to succeed because Christianity is very powerful in our local area.

[Ni-Vanuatu politician]

³⁹ Ian Johnstone and Michael Powles, <http://www.rnzi.com/newflagsflying/about.php>.

⁴⁰ Brij. V Lal, *A Vision for Change : A.D. Patel and the Politics of Fiji*, (Canberra National Centre for Development Studies, 1997): 38.

⁴¹ Ari. P Oro, "Religious Politicians" and "Secular Politicians" in Southern Brazil', *Social Compass* 54, no. 4 (2007): 583-92.

Moreover, the priest or pastor in politics remains a relatively common story, with some of the region's long serving political leaders, inaugural Prime Minister of Vanuatu Father Walter Lini, and former Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea and current President of the Autonomous Government of Bougainville, Father John Momis, for example, both ordained clergy.

Aside from helping them become well known, politicians reflect that being associated with the church enhances their reputation:

[In] Papua New Guinea, you have to be with the people, working with the people ... churches, youth, women, community work, all of that, and then you build up that reputation. They trust you.

[Papua New Guinean politician]

Or, as one Palauan politician reflected, 'If people see you go to church they tend to believe you are a good person.'⁴²

If churches provide a platform from which potential candidates develop a profile and reputation, their support can also significantly affect campaign outcomes:

If you get their [church] support it helps because the congregations tend to, you know, listen to the church leaders ... the candidate might not be very good and be involved in corruption and things like that but because the church leaders will say 'vote for him' then everyone will shift and vote for that one.

[Marshallese politician]

Consequently, many politicians use religious services and conferences during elections to connect with the people. In some Papua New Guinean constituencies, churches and other community groups put on rallies where candidates pay for the privilege, usually via public

⁴² See also Eves, 'Cultivating Christian Civil Society: Fundamentalist Christianity, Politics and Governance in Papua New Guinea'. Gibbs, 'Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Church and State in Papua New Guinea'.

donations, to address voters,⁴³ while in other instances, politicians use churches as vehicles to educate supporters on the mechanics of voting.

Political Parties and Coalitions

Political instability, caused by the relatively minor importance of bureaucratised political parties in most countries, is a prominent theme in the Pacific. The relatively stable hold of the HRPP on Samoan politics, and the ethnically dominated Fijian political parties are exceptions to the more common pattern of perpetual political manoeuvring and brinkmanship, with close observers often baffled by the frequency with which governments and coalitions are toppled by votes-of-no-confidence, particularly in Western Melanesia.⁴⁴ A number of factors are believed to contribute to this dynamic, including institutional design, the influence of vested interest groups, regional and personal alliances, money-politics and *realpolitik*. In contrast, the influence that churches can have on coalition formation is often understated.

Like schools and universities, religious associations are important avenues through which leaders build networks and alliances with other politicians. In Vanuatu, where churches played a prominent role in the movement towards independence by training and employing a generation of indigenous leaders, their influence was pivotal, as former Deputy Prime Minister of Vanuatu and clergyman, Sethy Regenvanu recalls:

I don't remember ever formally deciding to join NHNP [New Hebrides National Party], I just began to attend meetings and discuss political issues with my Ni-Vanuatu friends

⁴³ Ron May et al., eds., *Election 2007: The Shift to Preferential Voting in Papua New Guinea* (Port Moresby and Canberra: The National Research Institute and the State, Society and Government in Melanesia Program, 2011): 263 & 414.

⁴⁴ Fraenkel, 'Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions'. Rich, Hambly, and Morgan, eds., *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*.

and colleagues. I felt comfortable with the likes of Father Walter Lini, Father John Bani, Pastor Fred Timakata, and other Christian clergy who joined its ranks.⁴⁵

And while independence provides a unique historical context, churches remain influential in how coalitions rise and fall:

I was with [Manasseh] Sogavare ... because we are in the same church, Seventh Day Adventist. I said to him: 'Sogavare this is our church belief and I want you to know that ... I am here to make you the next Prime Minister.'
[Solomon Islands politician]

At the constituency level, individual politicians weigh the relative importance of churches and denominations to their election chances. In some cases, politicians claim they have no influence, while in others they are central to their campaign strategy:

I always felt that Congregationalists have a different view of things. The Mormons, they have different principles that they really stick to. Yes they are all Christian but there is a difference between people who don't smoke and don't drink strictly and don't gamble ... you need to be quite sensitive and pick carefully how you move within the [different] Samoan communities within your own village.
[Samoan politician]

Howard Van Trease finds in his analysis of politics in Kiribati that while the influence of mainstream churches is declining, it has played an important role in past elections.⁴⁶ And, while there is great variation from constituency to constituency, the declining influence of denominationalism is a common story across the region, in part reflecting the growing influence of evangelical and Pentecostal churches now active in many Pacific communities.

⁴⁵ Sathy. J Regenvanu, *Laef Blong Mi : From Village to Nation : An Autobiography* (Suva, Fiji : Institute of Pacific Studies ; Port Vila, Vanuatu : University of the South Pacific, Emalus Campus, 2004): 100.

⁴⁶ Howard Van Trease, 'Kiribati', in *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Levine (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009).

In most Pacific countries, where denominationalism has consequences for political dynamics, the effects are most keenly felt at the constituency level. However, in Fiji, where political parties have played a relatively prominent role in electoral politics, affiliations have national significance. The Methodist church is often associated with racial intolerance in the period following the 1987 coups,⁴⁷ while Lynda Newland's analysis of the Assembly of Christian Churches in the 2006 elections highlights the link between Christianity, indigenous Fijian identity and the SDL (*Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua*).⁴⁸ Equally, Jonathon Prasad's chapter in the same edited volume illustrates the historical importance of religious symbolism to both 'Dove' and 'Flower' factions of the Indo-Fijian dominated NFP.⁴⁹ However, he further argues that, mirroring the rise of the Fiji Labour Party, this influence has declined over the last two decades, with organisations that once backed the NFP now more circumspect in their endorsement.

Wariness is also a feature of Richard Eves' discussion of religion and political parties in Papua New Guinea.⁵⁰ He argues that while many are overtly religious (the Christian Democratic Party for example) Pentecostal or fundamentalist churches often eschew electoral politics altogether. The tension between involvement and withdrawal is also a feature of Edvard Hviding's description of the Christian Fellowship Church's activities in New Georgia, Solomon Islands.⁵¹ Despite being isolationist, Hviding argues that in the relative

⁴⁷ Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, *Pacific Monograph Series*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992): 317.

⁴⁸ Lynda Newland, 'The Role of the Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji in the 2006 Elections', in *From Election to Coup in Fiji: The 2006 Campaign and Its Aftermath*, eds. Jon Fraenkel and Stewart Firth (Canberra: ANU E Press and Asia Pacific Press, 2007). SDL is a political party which historically has been strongly supported by predominantly Christian ethnic Fijians.

⁴⁹ Jonathon Prasad, 'The Role of Hindu and Muslim Organizations During the 2006 Election', *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Eves, 'Cultivating Christian Civil Society: Fundamentalist Christianity, Politics and Governance in Papua New Guinea': 3.

⁵¹ Edvard Hviding, 'Re-Placing the State in the Western Solomon Islands', in *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific*, eds. Edvard Hviding and Kunt M. Rio (Wantage, United Kingdom: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011): 53. According to Hviding,

absence of the state, the church replaces many of its functions, including the provision of schooling and health care, whilst maintaining a connection with national government via the current leader, His Grace the Reverend Egan Rove, KBE, whose brother, Job Duddley Tausinga, and nephew, Silas Duddley Tausinga, are both members of parliament (MP).

Representing

After the election ... [you] go to each church on Sunday. It is a thanksgiving and you have to provide money for the church, maybe about \$500 to the church. It's for the community ... [the] next Sunday you go to another village.

[Niuean politician]

Echoing the separation between church and state that has become synonymous with contemporary forms of representative democracy, in much of the international literature on politicians they are usually delineated from other leadership types - business or community leaders for example. This trend is commonly associated with the professionalisation of the political class, defined by secure employment tenure, high salaries, and narrowing career trajectories dominated by political parties.⁵² In the Pacific Islands such distinctions, and terms like professionalisation, are problematic, with multiple or overlapping associations, identities, or 'habitus' the norm. For prime ministers and members of the Cabinet, politics can be a 'full-time' occupation but many backbenchers and opposition MPs undertake the job in addition to their regular employment. The local member is often also a business person, community organiser or activist. Their regular vocation might be as a doctor, accountant or lawyer. Many are former civil servants or school teachers, come from prominent families

the Christian Fellowship Church is described by some members of mainstream congregations in Solomon Islands as a cult.

⁵² See Heinrich and Maurizio Cotta, eds., *Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Pippa Norris, ed., *Passages to Power: Legislative Recruitment in Advanced Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Patrick Weller and Sue Fraser, 'The Younging of Australian Politics or Politics as a First Career', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 22, no. 2 (1987): 76-83.

with a history of political involvement, and in some cases they also hold chiefly titles.⁵³ They are nearly always men, although the women who do get elected tend to tell similar stories.

Given the relative absence of professionalisation, most politicians in the Pacific Islands do not have constituency offices or political staff - Cabinet Ministers tend to be an exception. Rather, each politician juggles their constituency work with their parliamentary commitments and, in many cases, their regular employment. Most remain active church members, lay preachers and hold leadership positions:

I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ... I am the branch President here in Palau ... I was involved with them before I became an elected leader, and I will continue to maintain those. And if those organisations will help me to be re-elected again, well that is great. Nobody is going to say no to that.

[Palauan politician]

Moreover, while most politicians do not give up their previous business and community activities once elected, many find that their new found status often provides additional responsibilities:

One of the things that shocked me was that as Minister of Finance I was suddenly given a position within the church ... I was automatically at the church conference, I was a voting member ... I thought 'Oh dear, I didn't expect this' especially as I am not a regular church goer.

[Tongan minister]

In addition to grooming candidates and helping them get elected, churches can also provide a link between a politician and their constituency. Those that live in or near their constituency reflect that regularly appearing at church is important to their re-election chances. This is more difficult for politicians who represent remote areas, particularly those

⁵³ While forms of chiefly authority vary across the region, in Samoa candidacy is reserved for holders of *matai* [chiefly] titles. Roughly half Samoa's male population, effectively every man over thirty, and around 10 per cent of women hold *matai* titles. See So'o and Fraenkel, 'The Role of Ballot Chiefs (Matai Palota) and Political Parties in Samoa's Shift to Universal Suffrage'.

spread across numerous islands serviced by infrequent shipping routes, but many remain in contact via family networks and associates. In countries where MPs are provided with discretionary funding for constituency projects, many politicians choose to channel these via church-run initiatives, while it is also relatively common for politicians to personally finance church-building activities.

Faith-based Motivations and 'Inner' Life

Involvement in religious organisations can help politicians develop the profile and reputation required to win an election, influence coalition formation and representative roles.

Expediency is the most common interpretation of this relationship with critics arguing that politicians manipulate these connections to secure election victories. Some do, and politicians are often quick to deride each other's intentions. Yet despite the 'symbolic capital' and associated public suspicion that leaders who believe they are 'chosen by God' attract, it is also impossible to ignore that many political leaders have deeply-held religious beliefs that underpin their motivations for political involvement and are central to what Bourdieu might call their disposition.⁵⁴ Consequently, while religious sentiment is often dismissed as hyperbole, it should come as no surprise that many of those who subscribe to a religious faith also see their political appointment as the realisation of a pre-ordained destiny, and are comfortable proclaiming their success as proof that they have been anointed by God:

I am going to be President of Palau ... as a young kid I always had this feeling and this idea that I am going to become a leader in my own island ... I feel that I am blessed. I am a very religious individual, my family is, and I just feel like it is my calling in this life.
[Palauan politician]

Motivations are inextricably linked to what a person thinks the purpose of their life is, and for those who ascribe to a particular faith or religion, politics can be the logical extension

⁵⁴ Bourdieu, 'Habitus'.

of their belief in a higher purpose. Not that all politicians who subscribe to a certain faith believe they are chosen by God, or that all of those who believe that politics is their calling do so on religious grounds, but a sense of manifest destiny is often articulated by political leaders - former Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka claimed that his role as coup leader in 1987 was 'a mission that God has given me'.⁵⁵ Moreover, politicians commonly explain their ethos of service as emerging from their religious beliefs, values and principles:

For me it is a calling ... I want to make a difference and it is about serving people. It is about bringing development ... So, it is not a job as such, you know. It is a purpose ... I don't know if it makes sense to you but yes, definitely a calling from God. And that is why it is almost like you don't have a choice.

[Fijian politician]

For Max Weber the 'calling' metaphor is associated with self-sacrifice,⁵⁶ normally interpreted as public service or the pursuit of a 'just cause':

Many people say 'what sort of God you have?' referring to Lord Krishna that he waged this terrible battle. But again, the philosophy behind that battle or war is that you stand for your rights ... So, yeah I think I would say that it has influenced my political thinking to some extent. I have also used examples of religious figures and their deeds in my political speeches.

[Fijian politician]

The 'calling' narrative is also used to rationalise their pursuit of higher office:

[Author] So do you have ambitions to be the Prime Minister one-day?
If the big man on top allows it. We are strong Christians. I do if the chance comes by ... yeah, I will grab it.

[Ni-Vanuatu politician]

⁵⁵ Dean Eddie and Stan Ritova, *Rabuka, No Other Way*, (Sydney: Doubleday, 1988): 11.

⁵⁶ Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W.G (Garry). Runciman (Cambridge University Press, 1978 [1919]).

Conversely, faith can also serve as a counterpoint to personal ambition, with politicians emphasising humility and servitude:

The job really needs divine assistance ... I mean you would not be able to do a lot of the things that you do unless you have God's assistance in all the things that you try to do ...
So the job has more or less aroused that feeling in me, to have God play an important role in my work.
[Samoan politician]

Moreover, echoing Bourdieu's belief that 'habitus' is constructed, shaped and learned in early childhood,⁵⁷ when asked to identify where their religious beliefs were moulded most single-out parents but also religious schooling, as Alan Howard illustrates in his biography of Rotuman Senator, Wilson Inia:

The Protestant ethic, as preached by John Wesley and taught to Wilson at Davuilevu, had a profound effect on the directions he was to take in life ...
All of Wilson's basic values stemmed from his religious training, including his beliefs in the sanctity of life and marriage, his concern for taking care of the poor and helpless, and his attitudes toward crime and punishment ...⁵⁸

Mixing Religion and Politics

So far I have emphasised how religious beliefs shape the political 'game' in the Pacific and illustrated how it influences the 'habitus' or disposition of politicians. However, this connection is not always seamless, as Bourdieu argues, 'habitus' is not static but rather responds and reconstitutes itself in the face of perceived changes and challenges, with every 'field' inhabited by tensions and contradictions.⁵⁹ Consequently, despite the enhanced profile

⁵⁷ Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture', in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, eds. Hillier and Rooksby 2nd ed. (Ashgate, 2005): 284.

⁵⁸ Alan Howard, *Hef Ran Ta (the Morning Star) a Biography of Wilson Inia, Rotuma's First Senator*, (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1994): 49 & 52.

⁵⁹ Bourdieu, 'Habitus': 47.

and reputation that involvement in religious organisations can bring, certain politicians fear that mixing religion and politics will heighten accusations of hypocrisy:

Nobody is perfect. I never claim to be perfect. In fact I am far from perfect ... I'm not one to go waving my religion flag around because you get into trouble ... they say 'oh he is a hypocrite' and I don't want that stigma ... there is only one perfect person but he lived 2000 years ago.

[Samoan politician]

For some, faith is a private matter, central to their inner self but one step removed from their later politics. Bain and Baba, for example, recall that Christian faith provided former Prime Minister of Fiji, Timoci Bavadra '... a source of indomitable inner strength and conviction to face the testing challenges that lay ahead'.⁶⁰ Others prefer to keep the two separate on principle:

No, churches are different, churches cannot play politics ... I don't play politics with business or church. It is a matter of asking the local people 'can you elect me to parliament?' and the answer is simple, yes or no.

[Papua New Guinean politician]

Conversely, for leaders like Lini, there is no distinction between religion and politics:

Should the Church play politics? My answer is yes ... The Church is a body which should uphold moral standards of justice. Politics is the way in which moral judgements are effected ... In other words, Church and politics are essential for man's existence and one could not do without the other.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Atu Bain and Tupeni Baba, eds., *Bavadra: Prime Minister, Statesman, Man of the People* (Nadi: Sunrise Press, 1990): ix-x.

⁶¹ Walter Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium: From the New Hebrides to Vanuatu*, (Wellington Asia Pacific Books, 1980): 19.

Values and principles, or what Robert Solomon calls ‘character’,⁶² can be enormously significant to how politicians approach their decision-making functions. Politicians often oppose gambling legislation, for example, on religious grounds. And while the legal-rational ideal privileges evidence-based policy making and utilitarian principles, many concede that in practice emotion can matter more than proof, just as hunches, ‘gut feel’ and prayer can be more persuasive than facts,⁶³ as the below quote illustrates:

I pray a lot ... politics is not black and white ... [Lots of factors] come in and then you pray to God to give you the right, you know, decision.
[Samoan politician]

That is not to say that religious principles homogenise policy debate. The plurality of views that politicians hold, both within and between religions and denominations, means that faith-based rationalisations cut across the political spectrum:

Casino is a good example of a controversial issues ... there are moral issues in all of these things ... In terms of religion, or Christianity, salvation is for individuals ... So, when I make a decision I always take into account personal responsibility ... So, if I allow you on the casino, I must also ask you to take responsibility.
[Solomon Islands politician]

Conversely, in some cases, by trying to keep their religious and political views separate, politicians alienate voters and supports:

I’m a Catholic and my biggest fight [was] with my Catholic Church ... on gambling and prostitution issues ... the questions is always raised ‘Why did you fight with the priest?’ I was practically brought up by Jesuit priests ... My issue was not whether or not gambling or prostitution is good or not. My issue was that they should not be involved in the political discussions.

⁶² Robert. C. Solomon, "What's Character Got to Do with It?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2005): 648-55.

⁶³ See also Clive Moore, 'Pacific Islands Autobiography: Personal History and Diplomacy in the Solomon Islands', *Journal of Historical Biography* 10 (Autumn)(2011): 1-33.

[This politician lost the subsequent election, although this defeat cannot be exclusively attributed to this dispute]

Faith and Corruption

The inherent tensions and contradictions that underpin conflict within a given ‘field’ are nowhere more apparent than in ‘talk’ about corruption, just as the capacity for religion to corrupt politics and *vice versa* remains a long-standing philosophical debate. Mark Philp argues that corruption is a synonym for perversion and is often applied to anything that is considered less than ideal.⁶⁴ In support of an ideal Jeffersonian model, the politician quoted above maintains that mixing religion and politics inevitably corrupts both vocations. In contrast, former Papua New Guinean Cabinet Minister, and later anti-corruption campaigner, Sir Anthony Siaguru urges churches to pursue justice by taking a stand against corrupt activities:

... I fail to see why the Churches should not speak out from the pulpit against the cult of corruption which is seeing this country slide into an abyss of its leaders’ making ... To my mind, the spiritual salvation of our young people demands the outspoken intervention of our religious leaders if only to point up the fact that the corruption and dereliction of duty of our leaders does not go unnoticed or un-condemned.⁶⁵

Echoing Philp, one alternative to this dualism is to recognise that the ‘problem’ is produced or defined by the distinction between these competing ideal types and the unavoidably messy nature of everyday political practice.⁶⁶ Rather than institutions or enforceable ethical codes, in this interpretation we rely on the common sense and prudence of individual politicians, tempered by democratic self-regulation.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Mark Philp, 'Defining Political Corruption', *Political Studies* XLV(1997): 436-62.

⁶⁵ Anthony Siaguru, *In-House in Papua New Guinea with Anthony Siaguru*, (Canberra Asia Pacific Press, 2001): 326.

⁶⁶ Philp, 'Defining Political Corruption'.

⁶⁷ See Solomon, "'What's Character Got to Do with It?'" Timothy Fuller, ed., *Leading and Leadership* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). John Uhr,

Given that this article is based entirely on the views of ‘successful’ politicians who already occupy public office, it is perhaps unsurprising that most favour the prudence approach. However, it is also important to note that politicians in the Pacific Islands, when discussing corruption, tend to talk in terms of their own personal moral values - something that resonates with a religious world view. This type of justification is commonly used to explain how they balance business interests and political decisions. It is an explanation that supporters of anti-corruption watchdogs are unlikely to be content with, especially if the desire to be re-elected is considered to be motivated entirely by greed and self-interest.

Despite gravitating towards a prudence perspective, as outlined above, the pursuit of a just cause, like corruption, is often defined in religious terms. Conversely, many admit that being in politics necessitates a constant battle to stay true to themselves and the beliefs they hold; that the trade-offs or compromises required to achieve political aims challenge their core values and beliefs. A minority claim to have never experienced situations of ethical dilemma when faced with tough decisions, but the more common story is that these situations are unavoidable as competing agendas necessitate negotiation and concession:

... my relatives are all in the business, they have big businesses here ... so I have to deal with those. But I have to be true to the things that I believe in personally, and it comes down to those of your personal [views]. Have I lied? Yes. Have I cut corners? Yes. But it is for something that I am committed to.

[Palauan politician]

Politicians also talk about being required to lie to their constituents to avoid cash hand-outs as one way that politics can compromise their values. Others recount the temptation of being offered large sums of money by commercial interests and foreign officials. Discretionary ‘slush funds’ are often identified as one source of such temptation,

'Professional Ethics for Politicians?', *International Public Management Journal* 8, no. 2 (2005): 247-62.

despite being ostensibly designed to alleviate the cash burden on politicians in Western Melanesia in particular.⁶⁸ Leadership codes and other legalised ethical instruments exist but many politicians concede they have little influence on their actions, although in many cases they also support strengthening them.

Some politicians claim that Christianity provides a higher, or greater, level of accountability, as former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Peter Kenilorea articulates:

In my view, political leadership is truly an honourable and most responsible calling, one that the ultimate leader, the sovereign God can call any worthy leader to undertake. My personal view is that political decisions affect humanity, and every leader, and particularly every political leader is, in the final analysis, accountable to God for every decision they make that affects human worth and dignity.⁶⁹

Conversely, being an MP also affords people opportunities that would have previously been unobtainable. They have greater capacity to secure favours for friends and family, to support business investments, and to accept inducements offered by moneyed interests. Some resist but others get caught. Stories of misused funds and squandered development opportunities abound in the Pacific, certainly too many to substantiate here,⁷⁰ and like elsewhere in the world many overtly religious politicians have been implicated and convicted.⁷¹

Politicians argue that the interplay between religion and corruption is made murkier by the ambiguous meaning of the term in the Pacific context. Peter Larmour distinguishes between Gothic and relativist interpretations of corruption in his book on the subject,⁷² while I have been quoted everything from the misuse of public funds to adultery. The latter

⁶⁸ Fraenkel, 'The Atrophied State: A Supply-Side Perspective on Politician "Slush Funds" In Western Melanesia', in Ron Duncan (ed.), *The political economy of economic reform in the Pacific* (Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong City, Philippines, 2011).

⁶⁹ Peter Kenilorea, *Tell It as It Is*, ed. Moore, C. (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2008): 203.

⁷⁰ For discussion see Crocombe, *The South Pacific*. Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*: 79-82.

⁷¹ Heather Marquette, 'Finding God' or 'Moral Disengagement' in the Fight against Corruption in Developing Countries? Evidence from India and Nigeria', *Public Administration and Development* 32(2012): 11-26.

⁷² Larmour, *Interpreting Culture and Corruption in the Pacific Islands*.

interpretation explains in part why extra-marital affairs are often the cause of political scandal, as in the case of former coup leader and Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka⁷³ or Cook Island's Cabinet Minister Papamama Pokino,⁷⁴ while veteran Tongan politician Joe Mataele cites 'playing around' as one reason for his electoral defeat.⁷⁵ Not that moral outrage at the sexual improprieties of politicians is unique to the Pacific. As Kate Jones highlights, the behaviour of political leaders often attracts levels of public outrage usually reserved for criminals and other social deviants.⁷⁶ Conversely, in the Pacific, public displays of ritualised repentance, imbued with Christian motifs of forgiveness and reflecting cultural mores relating to compensation and reconciliation, can redeem even the most vilified leader.⁷⁷

Conclusion

In his vision of a Melanesian Way as a 'total cosmic view of life', Papua New Guinean philosopher, professed Catholic, and former cabinet minister, Bernard Narakobi, argues that differentiation between religious and non-religious experiences is foreign to many Pacific Islanders who view the world as an integrated whole.⁷⁸ Echoing this perspective, in this article I have highlighted that religiosity is an assumed and often unchallenged component of Pacific identity, despite its relative absence from much of the literature on electoral politics in the region. Conversely, this understanding of spirituality is the antithesis of the secularism

⁷³ John Sharpham, *Rabuka of Fiji*, (Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2000): 266-7.

⁷⁴ PIM. 'Minister's Sex Scandal Rocks Rarotonga'. *Syme-Buchanan, F* (November 1998): 10.

⁷⁵ IB. 'At Joe's Kahana, the Host Is the Character'. *Lomas, D* (January 1988): 31.

⁷⁶ Kate Jones, 'Politicians as the Subjects of Moral Panic', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (2008): 243-58.

⁷⁷ In a column for the Fiji Times, 2/9/ 2008, <http://www.fjitime.com/story.aspx?id=99486>, Rabuka apologised and sought forgiveness for his role in the 1987 coups, citing the Book of James 1:19-20. This was followed by a formal public statement in the nation's dailies on 1 January 2012.

⁷⁸ Tom Otto, 'After the 'Tidal Wave': Bernard Narakobi and the Creation of a Melanesian Way', in *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific*, eds. Tom Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997): 54.

espoused by Jefferson, which advocates distinct roles for the state and religion, with the former concerned with public affairs, and the latter reduced to the private sphere.

In this article I have described how personal faith informs everyday political practice. Through the medium of biography I have illustrated how religious and spiritual experiences are embedded within family and community relationships, institutions and careers, and demonstrated how they impact decision-making, election campaigning, coalition formation and representative functions. In doing so, I have advanced two arguments. Firstly, despite the overwhelming religiosity seemingly obvious in public rhetoric, politicians have divergent views on the appropriate relationship between the state and religion. As the equivocality apparent in much of the ‘talk’ about corruption highlights, secularisation is an effervescent narrative with politicians active on all sides of this debate. In many respects, the nature of this discussion in the Pacific is an inverted version of the global debate which primarily views the rise of religious fundamentalist movements and associated political parties as a challenge to the secular orthodoxy. In contrast, as the Ernst volume illustrates, in much of the Pacific the corresponding influence of these same movements presents a challenge to the predominance of mainstream churches, heightening political differences and conflict, with secularism presented as one possible alternative.⁷⁹

Secondly, in the relative absence of professionalisation, ideal analytic distinctions like state, society and religion become problematic in the Pacific Islands where political leaders tend to occupy multiple roles and assume overlapping identities. I have employed ‘habitus’ as conceptual framework to interpret this dynamic by highlighting how individuals move between polemics, negotiate tensions and ameliorate conflicts, with specific reference to their ‘inner’ life or disposition. Not that everyday practice is seamless. Broader ‘fields’ frame choices, while individual capacity can explain why some leaders thrive whilst others

⁷⁹ Ernst, ed., *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*.

flounder. Moreover, as the corruption discussion illustrates, conflicts occur when deciding how values and beliefs, defined by public debate, are applied and implemented.

Consequently, rather than clear cut distinctions between ideal analytic types, the messy and contingent frame of practice provides a nuanced counterpoint to reductive interpretations of political life and the sense of incongruity they tend to generate.

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