

EDINBURGH COMPANIONS TO GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

# Christianity in Oceania

*Edited by*

**Kenneth R. Ross, Katalina Tahaafe-Williams and  
Todd M. Johnson**

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# Religious Freedom

Jacqueline Ryle

The introduction of Christianity into Oceania is widely viewed as a success story for Christian mission, since within 200 years most of the peoples of Oceania had taken on the *lotu* (Christian faith). Much of the mission endeavour was conducted by thousands of Pacific Islanders, under the leadership of small groups of missionaries from Europe, North America, South America, Australia and New Zealand. Pacific Islander theologians emphasise that their ancestors' strong beliefs in a divine presence and in the afterlife made them very open to Christian faith and produced a remarkable strength of belief. At the same time, missionaries imported historical denominational conflicts and antagonisms to their mission fields and Pacific Islanders incorporated these faith identities and divisions into historical and existing local power dynamics, resulting in some places in bitter conflict and battles. In many cases such divisions have been passed on through the generations to the present day, though in Fiji, Tonga and Kiribati these conflicts and antagonisms have largely disappeared. Prejudices within new churches against mainline churches, such as the Catholic Church, cause new rifts and divisions.

Christianity's strong historical roots and contemporary foundational place in nations across Oceania is borne out in population statistics. According to the 2019 US State Department Freedom of Religion Report, most Pacific Island states, except Fiji, have a Christian population of more than 90%. Kiribati, with a Christian population of 99%, 57% of whom are Catholics, tops the statistics. In addition to the presence of historic mainline churches, the numbers of localised syncretic new religions and movements are increasing, and the list of globalising Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches across the region is ever-expanding.

These developments, responses to the increasing pace of societal and sociocultural change, come at the cost of historic mainline church membership. Growing numbers, especially of young people, are drawn by the vibrant worship style and contemporary music of Protestant Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and groups that link to transnational globalising networks. This increasing diversity of competing churches challenges the previously taken-for-granted position of historic mainline, especially

Protestant, churches, which, in general, have been unable to find solutions to stem the loss of members.

While offering individuals alternative faith options based on choice rather than an inherited faith based on family and clan allegiance, joining new churches often leads to domestic disputes, domestic violence, and dissent and division within families, clans, villages and communities. The traditional role of religion as a source of communal coherence and solidarity is displaced by fragmenting dynamics that are both a symptom of and a contributing factor to a weakening of communality in favour of individualism.

### **Rights, Freedoms and Obligations**

Freedom of religion was drafted as part of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Article 18 of the UDHR states,

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and the freedom alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Discussions in Pacific Island nations that draw on the UDHR to promulgate rights-based issues, such as women's rights and the rights of sexual-minority persons, are often dismissed as imposing Western values on Pacific Island traditions, cultures and religion. Yet the UDHR document was a highly international one, drafted by representatives of an extremely broad range of countries, cutting across continents – and initially not supported by the UK or the USA. Most Pacific Island constitutions draw on this document and on the later International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from 1966.

At the same time, the freedoms outlined in these documents are not easily translatable to Pacific Island contexts. In Pacific Island cultures a person is never an individual in the Western sense but always relationally constituted, embedded within closely interwoven clan and communal relationships and obligations. Discussions on freedom of religion in Oceania need therefore to be contextualised in relation to local, historically situated sociocultural and religious complexities. These include traditional values of consensus, harmony and homogeneity in community life; widespread patriarchal dominance in gender and family relations; women's generally limited access to decision-making; traditional leadership by chiefs or male elders in church allegiance and practice; and pervasive communal pressure to conform to given norms and practices, such as belonging to a given denomination, attending church every Sunday or paying levies.

Membership of historic mainline churches is based on the interweaving of church-, faith- and communally-based cultural practices and obligations. Adherence to new fundamentalist or Pentecostal churches usually requires adherents to eschew communal cultural practices and, often, to break with family and cultural commitments. This adds to tensions between those who belong to old and to new churches. These tensions in turn lead to increased religious intolerance and can result in the banishment of individuals or minority religious groups from villages.

### **Pacific Island Constitutions**

The interweaving of religion, tradition and politics in Pacific Island cultures makes these interdependent elements almost indistinguishable from each other. The Fijian religio-cultural structure of *vanua*, *lotu*, *matanitu* (belonging to the land and tradition, Christian faith, and government), known as the Three Pillars of Fijian society, was transposed to parts of Papua New Guinea by Fijian missionaries, and similar constructs exist in other Pacific Island countries. The centrality of these interweavings is displayed by the prominent place that Christianity holds in almost all Pacific Island national constitutions. In different ways these constitutions acknowledge God and the blessings given by God, recognise the centrality of Christianity in the past, present and future, and affirm community responsibilities and duties as well as individual human rights.

In his research paper for the Fiji Constitutional Review Process in 1995, the late Revd Paula Niukula, former president of the Methodist Church in Fiji, argued against the call by the then Methodist Church leadership in Fiji to declare Fiji a Christian state. He noted five different ways in which Oceanic constitutions reflect the *relations* between religion and the state. Some Preambles, such as those of Sāmoa and Tonga, affirm faith in God. Others, such as Vanuatu's, acknowledge a place for Christianity, often in relation to custom and tradition. Others again, such as that of the Solomon Islands, refer more generally to God's guidance and blessing on the nation.

Tonga's constitution from 1875 predates any human rights legislation. And, except for the most recent Pacific Island nation, Palau, which became independent in 1994, all Pacific Island constitutions were drawn up between 1962 and 1980, during decolonisation. Sāmoa became the first independent Pacific Island nation, in 1962; Vanuatu gained independence in 1980. All constitutions include a Bill of Rights, based on the UDHR, that includes freedom of belief and expression. Several constitutions note duties and community values as well as individual human rights. The Tongan constitution is the only one that has a Sunday observance clause. Niukula noted that despite the prominence of Christianity in all constitutions in Oceania at that time, none stated that Christianity should be the state



religion. This, however, is no longer the case, as in 2017 Sāmoa became a Christian state in the *de jure* sense. The original wording of Article 1 of the Sāmoan constitution was 'Sāmoa is founded on God'. This wording expressed a religious conception that could include all religious groups. The amended Article 1 now reads 'Sāmoa is a Christian nation founded of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. This conception of God is indisputably Christian. The rationale for adopting the change was to embed Christianity within the body of the constitution, so that it is legally binding, as the wording in a preamble is not legally binding. Another reason given for the change was to protect Sāmoa from religious tensions in the future – from within and from outside influences, with reference given to violent religious wars elsewhere. Although official statistics are lacking, there are very small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews in Sāmoa, mainly in the capital, Apia. While Sāmoa is now legally a Christian state, the rights of the individual to freedom of religion, as outlined in Article 11, remain unchanged. At the same time, observers note that the constitutional change could result in denominational rivalry for religious influence in Sāmoan politics.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is in line to become the second officially Christian state in Oceania. On 18 August 2020 the National Executive Council approved a proposal to 'clearly declare Christianity as the Official State Religion in the Constitution.... Other religions will be allowed to practice their faith in the country but with respect to the [*sic*] Christianity as the Official State Religion', Prime Minister James Marabe is quoted as saying on the Department of the Prime Minister and Executive Council's website, noting that PNG's non-Christian population is 4%. The approval of this constitutional change will, he said, secure the long-term peace and safety of PNG. He added, 'Should the Constitution of PNG protect the freedom of religion by limiting it to Christianity, potential religious bigotry that could give rise to civil war, chaos and instability will be averted'.

So, similar to the Sāmoan rationale for declaring the country a *de jure* Christian state, PNG cites the violence of religious wars elsewhere, with specific reference to the Middle East. Churches and civil society organisations have opposed the move, saying it threatens freedom of religion. Indeed, declaring PNG a Christian state opens up the question, as also with regard to Sāmoa, of which denomination will be the determining one in a Christian state.

A heated debate that broke out in the PNG media in November and December 2013 concerning the controversial actions of the speaker of the PNG national parliament, Theodore Zurenuoc, a fundamentalist Christian, illustrates this point. Zurenuoc started removing from Parliament House traditional carvings he deemed idolatrous, in a personal

project to spiritually cleanse the house of what he considered demonic forces contained in the material objects. Zurenuoc's acts sparked a fiery debate in PNG's two national newspapers and on social media.

The preamble to the constitution of PNG declares that the country is founded on two basic principles, 'our cultural heritage and our Christianity'. However, this interweaving of culture and Christianity pertains only to the historic mainline churches. These churches are theologically in dialogue with people and culture, and interwoven with traditions, past and present. Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, are interconnected to global Christian communities. These churches generally classify that which is pre-Christian as demonic, to be battled against in 'spiritual warfare' and conquered by the 'superior' power of Christianity. The understanding is strongly dualistic and Pauline in its sharp division between pre-conversion darkness and the light of Christianity. All things traditional and all acts associated with tradition and the past are linked with darkness and sin. The language employed is militant, and actions against this darkness are considered 'spiritual warfare'.

On the one side of the PNG debate, then, were Christians of fundamentalist and Pentecostal backgrounds who saw Zurenuoc as doing God's will through spiritual warfare, exorcising dangerous and destructive forces from the parliament building. On the other were Christians from mainline churches, and others, who saw Zurenuoc as committing cultural sacrilege by destroying invaluable cultural heritage. These contesting representations demonstrate the highly complex field of Christianities in PNG that is mirrored in other Pacific Island societies.

### **Fiji – A Secular State**

Perhaps the country in the region where issues of religious freedom have come into clearest focus is Fiji, with its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition and turbulent post-independence coup history. In 2013 Fiji's then military government adopted by decree a new constitution that declared Fiji a secular state. This added another dimension to Fiji's complex religious, ethnic and political landscape. Fiji is a meeting point of contested, entangled and often unclear representations of culture, tradition, religion, freedom of religion and secularism, and is therefore of particular interest in discussions on freedom of religion in Oceania in the twenty-first century.

In 2020, according to UN estimations, the population of Fiji was 896,445. Although the most recent census was in 2017, the most recent available statistics on religious affiliation are from the 2007 census. At that time, the population was just over 837,000. Religious affiliation in Fiji has always

run almost entirely along ethnic lines. In 2007, 57% of the population was *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) and almost all were Christian; 37% were Indo-Fijian, most of whom were Hindu. According to the census, 64.5% of the population was Christian, 27.9% Hindu and 6.3% Muslim. The Methodist Church counted 34.6% of the population, the Roman Catholic Church 9.1%.

The constitution made *de jure* what had been *de facto* since independence from the UK in 1970: Fiji has always been a secular state, and freedom of religion had always been guaranteed by former governments, though not formerly written into the constitutions. Yet from the mid-1980s ethnic tensions between the two main ethnic groups led a vocal minority of militant ethno-nationalist groups, mainly from certain quarters of the Methodist Church, to advocate for Fiji being declared a Christian state. Two military coups in 1987 and a civilian coup in 2000, directed against the Indo-Fijian community, were actively supported by the Methodist Church in Fiji. A fourth coup, in 2006, led by the current Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama – ostensibly a ‘clean-up’ coup to root out corruption – resulted in the forming of a military government that was in place until the elections of 2014.

While the declaration of Fiji as a secular state was a response to the threat of Fiji being declared a Christian state, the manner of its making and its adoption by decree were highly contentious. The 2013 constitution replaced a 2012 draft constitution that had been broadly accepted throughout the country. It was the result of an extensive and in-depth review process, led by an overseas constitutional expert, consulting all levels of society, including civil society organisations, religious bodies and individuals. However, when the draft constitution was about to be released to the public, the military government intervened. All copies were burned at the printer’s and, giving no time for more than symbolic civic consultation, the government made its own amendments and then adopted by decree the 2013 constitution, with its secular-state declaration.

The shock and dismay this effected throughout society meant that the 2013 constitution is viewed by many Fijians as having been ‘thrust down our throats’. The lack of consultation and lack of explanation then and since of what the term ‘secular state’ – an entirely new term in Fiji society – means and entails is problematic. And to a large part of the population it will always be associated with the manner in which the 2013 constitution was adopted.

Yet to the Indo-Fijian communities of Fiji’s many different Indian religions, the declaration of Fiji as a secular state was a watershed moment. They felt a greater sense of legal protection than they had before. Having experienced stones being thrown on the roofs of houses during prayers

and temples being looted and burned, a priest from the Arja Samaj Hindu organisation in Fiji commented, '[There's] assurance that [should] anyone should disturb you in your prayers, you ... have recourse to the law ... that the law should protect you ... [should there be] any ... misbehaviour against any religion.' His point was echoed by the national president of Fiji's largest Hindu organisation, Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha Fiji. 'That was the sunrise for us', he said. 'We were very happy ... that now there will be less burning of temples' (interviews with author, July 2019).

Fiji's Christians, on the other hand, were deeply concerned. Many lay Christians felt they had lost the freedom to be Christians. Many were under the impression that Fiji had always been a Christian state and that this had now been taken from them. To many Christians it appeared that God had been removed from the constitution and from society. To Christian theologians and church leaders, such as Roman Catholic Archbishop Dr Loy Chong, newly installed in 2013 with the episcopal motto 'To be church in the world', there was concern at the interpretation of the wording of the constitution and how this might be used to limit the freedom of the prophetic role of churches in society.

While the separation of church and state in the constitution is in keeping with Roman Catholic teaching, Clause 1:4(2) of the constitution, that 'religion is personal', is problematic, according to Archbishop Chong, and could be used to silence the prophetic voice of the church. Between 2009 and 2013 the Methodist Church in Fiji had been prohibited by the government from holding its annual conference. Fiji thus had already experienced the infringement of freedom of religion. 'They [said] "you can have your religion but it can have nothing to do with society" – which denies the public character [of faith]' (Chong, interview with author, 2014).

Fiji's 2013 constitution departs in significant ways from the country's previous constitutions and from all other Pacific Island constitutions in that it does not mention Christianity and, though peoples, cultures, traditions and languages are mentioned, there is no mention of religion in the Preamble. The concerns of Christians in the country were well expressed by Archbishop Chong when he stated,

The constitution should reflect the values that a country holds. And a lot of our values are embedded in religious institutions. A constitution is supposed to protect values, what we hold to be important. When a constitution does not reflect [our] values it's almost contradictory to what we hold in our hearts. (Interview with author, February 2014)

These are concerns not only of the Catholic Church in Fiji; they are shared by all church leaders, who are anxious about the ramifications that the 2013 constitution might have for freedom of religion in the country. Lack

of consultation and lack of open, clear and nuanced societal debate on the declaration of Fiji as a secular state means that concern voiced about the secular state is often interpreted as support for a Christian state.

However, Archbishop Chong has made it clear that 'We do not want a theocracy. We never said we want a Christian state. However, we are concerned about whether a secularist state wants to reduce faith to a purely individualistic matter.' The vision of the church is 'a secular state that is respectful of religious beliefs present in society' (Dr Peter Loy Chong, Archbishop of Suva, *Agenzia Fides*, 11 December 2013).

### **Faith-based Education and the State**

Another issue of contention between churches and the Fiji government derives from the Ministry of Education's introduction of the so-called Open Merit Recruitment System of Selection (OMRSS) for head teacher and teaching appointments at primary and high schools. Rendering redundant memorandums of understanding between the education boards of different faiths and the Ministry that had been in place for decades, the OMRSS gives the Ministry of Education sole control of all recruitment. Faith-based organisations have consistently requested of the Ministry that school principals or head teachers should be members of the faith of the school to which they are appointed, so that they are able to support the ethos of that school. Yet to many people involved in faith-based education, the Ministry appears to be following a strategy of replacing teachers and heads of faith-based schools with appointees of other faiths.

This absence of consultation with faith-based organisations gives a clear sense that this is a strategic diluting of religious influence as part of a policy of tighter government control of society. It also fails to recognise the significant historical contribution made to education in Fiji by different religions, as well as their continuing contribution, and is considered an infringement of freedom of religion as guaranteed in Article 22(4) of the constitution. This states that 'Every religious community or denomination, and every cultural or social community, has the right to establish, maintain and manage places of education whether or not it receives financial assistance from the State, provided that the educational institution maintains any standard prescribed by law.' The Catholic Church alone runs 44 primary schools, 19 secondary schools and Corpus Christi Teacher's College, and has 1,000 registered Catholic teachers. In early 2019, when tensions between churches and the government were at their highest, Archbishop Loy Chong threatened to close all Catholic schools.

As the elected chair of the multifaith committee set up by the faith organisations, among the requests made by Archbishop Chong to the Ministry of Education were that the choice of head teacher be based not

only on excellent performance but also on the ability to uphold and foster the ethos of the school; that appointments of school heads be made in consultation with the school management committee; that a representative of the faith-based organisation be a member of the recruiting panel for school heads; that a percentage of the teachers belong to the faith of the school; and that the agreement between the Education Ministry and faith-based organisations and communities on the above issues be documented as part of the Education Act to ensure the stability and security of faith-based schools.

A high-profile court case between the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Fiji and the Fijian government concerns the Adventist Church's challenge to the Ministry of Education's appointment of a Catholic head teacher to one of its high schools. The Seventh-day Adventist Church won its case in November 2019. The Fijian government appealed and at the time of writing the appeal had not yet been heard. By far the majority of Fiji's schools are faith-based, so the outcome of this court case has great significance for churches and religious organisations.

The faith-based school appointments issue clearly demonstrates that while declaring Fiji a secular state in 2013 was ostensibly a move to guarantee freedom of religion, the current government – under the same leadership as the military government in 2013 – seems more intent on controlling religion, systematically weakening it, and replacing it with increasing levels of secularisation and government control. Many observers see this as part of a wider strategy by the government of crushing Indigenous Fijian sociocultural structures based on the tripartite conceptual understanding of *vanua* (belonging to the land and people), *lotu* (church) and *matanitu* (governance) in order to radically reshape Fiji into a modern, Western-style nation-state.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

Provision for religious freedom in Australia and New Zealand is shaped primarily by Western traditions. The religious freedom clause in the federal constitution in Australia is based on the First Amendment to the US constitution. It states,

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

Australia clearly understands itself to be a secular country with separation of church and state and no state religion. Legislation at the state and territory level provides for freedom of religion, though Tasmania is the

only state with a constitution that specifically provides citizens with the right to profess and practise their religion. Most states and territories do, however, have legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of a person's religion.

Recent debate has centred around the freedom of individuals and institutions to express religiously held views on sexuality, marriage and family life that would otherwise be regarded as discriminatory. The lack of a comprehensive Bill of Rights means that this is contested terrain, as demonstrated in 2019 by the sacking of Sāmoan Australian rugby player Israel Folau for his controversial posting on social media: 'Drunks, Homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists, Idolators: Hell Awaits You. Repent! Only Jesus Saves.' Folau took Rugby Australia to court, arguing that the termination of his contract was a case of religious discrimination. The dispute, the first of its kind in Australian legal history, was settled out of court. The case highlights what may be considered a fine line between freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and discriminatory, derogatory speech directed against individuals or communities. At the time of writing, a Religious Freedom Bill was being prepared, particularly with a view to protecting the rights of employees to express their religious convictions in the course of their professional lives.

While Australia's ethos in relation to religion is generally easy-going and tolerant, it also has shrill political voices of religious intolerance at the political level, as is experienced across the world today. High-profile events in recent years such as the Melbourne and Sydney Islamist terrorist attacks in 2017, the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks by an Australian white supremacist, and the trial of Roman Catholic Cardinal Pell in Melbourne in 2019 on charges of child abuse have highlighted tensions between the growing secularism of Australian society and religion. The Islamist terror attacks led on the one hand to anti-Muslim sentiments and reactions against Muslims on social media and in public spaces. On the other they led to many expressions of solidarity and empathy from non-Muslims toward Muslims, including the physical protection of Muslims travelling on public transport. The contemporary rise in anti-Semitism, harassment and attacks on Jewish people, recorded in almost all societies across the world, is also a reality in Australia.

New Zealand, too, is a secular society and observes freedom of religion. The 1990 Bill of Rights Act states, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, including the right to adopt and hold opinions without interference.' The government does not require the licensing or registration of religious groups, but if a religious group desires to collect money for any charitable purpose – including the advancement of its religion – and obtain tax benefits, it must register with

the Department of Internal Affairs. Christians are free to profess and advocate their beliefs, including through forming political parties, with two currently registered political parties having a Christian basis. At the same time, New Zealand is one of the most secular countries in the world, with 49% of the population professing to have no religion. A 2018 Commonwealth report found that of its 53 member nations, New Zealand is the country with the greatest religious freedom.

This ethos came into global view in the aftermath of the 15 March 2019 Christchurch terror attacks by an Australian white supremacist at two mosques, in which 51 Muslims lost their lives and 49 were injured. The shock and sadness experienced throughout the nation and the ways in which New Zealanders responded with empathy and care were relayed across the world. The images of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, her hair respectfully covered by a scarf, embracing grieving Muslim women sent out strong messages of multiculturalism, religious respect, inclusivity and love of neighbour. In a further gesture of solidarity with the Muslim community, the New Zealand government invited a Muslim imam to intone the Quranic bismillah in praise of Allah at the opening of the parliamentary session on 19 March, days after the massacre. Other powerful messages of solidarity were expressed in performances of the *haka* throughout the country. The Christchurch attacks brought New Zealanders together in an outpouring of grief and sorrow at the tragedy that had been wrought by an outsider on their land. The moment also opened up for discussions at all levels of society the structural inequalities, tensions and insidious violence of everyday prejudice against minority groups, the casual racism and legacy of New Zealand's colonial past that lie, often unnoticed by the privileged, under the surface of society, as in all other societies across the world.

Fiji lost three members of the country's small Muslim community in the Christchurch attacks. Interfaith vigils were held at the main mosque in Suva, at the Anglican Cathedral and at the University of the South Pacific campus. Beneath the sense of sharing in the tragedy and loss of a close neighbour and member of the Pacific *vuvale* (family) were other feelings of unease at the knowledge that religious violence of such proportions had now come so close to home. And, as in New Zealand, it brought up similar discussions of how easily prejudice and racism simmer under the surface and, especially, circulate in social media postings.

## Conclusion

This essay has shown that the concept of freedom of religion is not easily translatable to Pacific Island cultures. Just as in Pacific Island cultures a person is never an individual in the Western sense but always relationally



constituted, embedded within closely interwoven clan and communal relationships and obligations, so it is with freedom of religion. On the one hand, it is written into constitutions based on the UDHR. On the other, it is embedded in complex fields of contested and contesting representations of Christianity, culture, tradition, politics and secularism. Discussions on freedom of religion in Oceania need therefore to be contextualised in relation to local, historically situated sociocultural and religious complexities. And these local complexities are in turn inextricably interconnected with wider regional and global processes, past and present.

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