

DOCUMENTATION

Towards a Religious Map of Papua New Guinea

The most important document on Papua New Guinea, i.e., the country's Constitution, calls Papua New Guinea a Christian country.¹ This means, first of all, that Christian principles have played a significant role in formulating the fundamental options and orientations of the Constitution. And this was possible, only because a very large proportion of Papua New Guineans consider themselves Christians. In that sense, too, Papua New Guinea is a Christian country.

How large, exactly, is this proportion? And, in that specific sense of the word, how "Christian" is the population of Papua New Guinea? A recent publication in Germany gave an estimate of 68 percent Christian and 32 percent non-Christians/animists.² This is a very different figure from what would seem to follow from the census data given below for 1980.

Inevitably, the Christianity of Papua New Guinea reflects the divisions among Christians in the rest of the world. The same article gives the following:

790,000	Roman Catholic church	25%
550,000	Evangelical Lutheran church	18%
60,000	Gutnius Lutheran church	2%
210,000	United church	7%
80,000	Baptist church	2.5%
160,000	Anglican church	5%
360,000	Evangelical groups	11.5%
990,000	Non-Christians/animists	32%

¹ Literally: "pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now": "Preamble to the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea".

² F. Steinbauer, ed., *Bulletin of German Pacific Society*, G123 (May, 1985), p. 10.

Naturally these figures intend to give no more than a very rough idea of the situation. Even so, the question can be asked how close they get to the actual situation.

A hand-out, *Religion in Papua New Guinea: A Brief Introduction*, by Carl Loeliger, for the courses Religion in Melanesia (16.101) and Religion and Culture (16.136), at the University of Papua New Guinea, October, 1978, gives the following figures, with the warning that they are approximate, based on information from the churches, and are probably “conservative”:

Roman Catholic church	670,000
Evangelical Lutheran church	476,000
Gutnius Lutheran church	45,000
United church	250,000
Anglican church	150,000
Seventh-day Adventist	50,000
Evangelical Alliance (including ± 20,000 Baptists)	136,000
Salvation Army	1,500
Jehovah’s Witnesses (including 1,500 active field workers)	6,000
Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is	6,000

Small churches and missions, it is said, are not mentioned.³

The figures, given above, are quoted mainly to illustrate the need for a more-accurate religious map of Papua New Guinea. People involved in planning and policy-making could easily be led into rather strange decisions, were they to assume, for instance, that 32 percent of the Papua New Guinea people are still non-Christians!

³ No attempt has been made to “quantify” traditional religions. Loeliger points out, and I think rightly, that traditional religions are not likely to disappear, but will probably live on as a pervasive force, channelling the interpretation and understanding of Christianity, as well as being influenced by it. Cf. Loeliger, “Religion in Papua New Guinea”, pp. 1, 8.

The 1980 census asked the following question: “Do you belong to a church? Write name of the church, or ‘NO’ ”. Unfortunately, this question was contained only in a form reserved to urban areas. For the rural areas, an attempt was made later on to fill in the blanks, by testing “stratified clusters”. The question was addressed to citizens only, and to persons of ten years of age, or more. The results were extrapolated over the whole population (10 years of age, and over, citizens only), which led to the following figures:⁴

Anglicans	82,303	3.9%
Baptists	49,359	2.3%
Roman Catholics	718,352	34.55%
Evangelical Alliance	186,465	8.9%
Evangelical Lutheran	504,871	24.2%
Gutnius Lutheran	44,102	2.1%
Jehovah’s Witnesses	6,159	0.3%
Salvation Army	1,058	0.05%
Seventh-day Adventists	96,498	4.6%
United church	272,469	13.1%
Other Mission and Faith	43,121	2.0%
No religion	54,744	2.6%
Not stated	7,046	0.3%
Not asked	12,581	0.6%
TOTAL	2,079,128	

Extrapolating data from “stratified clusters” naturally gives only approximate results, with the special risk of inflating the figures for the large churches, and getting figures for the smaller groups that are too low.⁵ Still, a great deal can be learned from them.

The first question we can ask is: where are the non-Christians, or, more precisely, in Papua New Guinea, those who retain traditional

⁴ These figures were given to me by M. L. Bakker of the National Statistical Office, Port Moresby, with permission to use them, pending publication of a monograph on the subject.

⁵ Oral communication of M. L. Bakker.

religions? A Papua New Guinean would not refer to a traditional religion as a “church”, so people adhering to them may either have answered “No” to the question, as it was asked, or said “no religion”, or not have stated anything at all. Even so, that would not add up to a full five percent. The conclusion must be that about 95 percent of Papua New Guinea citizens describe themselves as adhering to one Christian church or another. This does not mean that these people are always “formal” members, i.e., that they have gone through the steps, by which the churches themselves would count them as “members”, e.g., baptism. And such people may well still practise traditional religions, at the same time as they consider themselves in some way “adherents” of this or that church. Nevertheless, there is this basic option for a Christian church. Clearly, the future task of the churches lies, not in expansion, but in consolidation.

As far as the relative “strength” of individual churches is concerned, it should not be impossible to check the census figures against information from the churches themselves, as Loeliger did in 1978. I shall try to do so here, for the Catholic church only.

In each case, one must take into account the criteria of the churches for membership. Catholic church figures would include children under 10 years of age, but only those baptised. They would also include non-citizens. If we now extend the 34.55 percent census figure over the whole citizen population of 2,978,057,⁶ on the assumption that children under 10 in Catholic families are baptised, we get 1,058,699. And, if we take it over the total population, including non-citizens,⁷ assuming the percentage of Catholics among them is the same as among citizens, 34.55 percent of 3,010,727 would amount to 1,070,313.

In actual fact, internal church figures are much lower. For 1980, the year of the census, the number was given as 878,709, i.e., 29.18

⁶ Census figures are taken from “1980 National Population Census: A Pre-release: Summary of Final Figure”, Port Moresby PNG: National Statistical Office, nd.

⁷ Non-citizens were only 32,670 out of 3,010,727, i.e., 1.08 percent, in 1980.

percent of the whole population, as known from the census.⁸ For 1983, the figure given is 974,501, i.e., 30.3 percent of the total population that could be estimated for that year.⁹ Why the difference of more than four percent?

First of all, we must take into account, as already indicated, that the extrapolations of the census figures would tend to favour the larger groups. On the other hand, church figures are often very approximate themselves, which shows, if we see how some figures are given in neat thousands, or even, tens of thousands.¹⁰ Finally, census figures could well include people who can be expected gradually to become full members of the churches. It seems, therefore, that church figures can safely be rounded off upwards, to meet census figures, and these, in the case of the major churches, have to be taken down a few notches. For the Catholic component of the Papua New Guinea population, an estimate of 31 percent to 32 percent seems reasonable.¹¹

For anyone trying to work out a religious map of Papua New Guinea, these are fairly safe figures to start with: no more than five percent non-Christians, and 31-32 percent Roman Catholics. Perhaps other churches will be prepared to adjust their own estimates and census figures to fill in the other blank areas, until such time as another census simply asks people everywhere about their religious affiliation. The fact that less than one percent actually did not answer, or was not asked (and that can have had many reasons), shows that people in Papua New Guinea have no objections to the question being included, as may be the

⁸ Church figures are taken from *Annuario Pontificio*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, published each year. Figures are always presumed to be the ones of the preceding year.

⁹ Using the projections given by M. L. Bakker, "Population Projections for the Citizen Population of Papua New Guinea for the period 1980-2015", Study presented to the Seminar on Population Growth and its Implications, May 24, 1985, Port Moresby PNG: National Statistical Office.

¹⁰ Cf. *Paper Prepared for the Visit of Pope John Paul II to Papua New Guinea, May 7-10, 1984*, Port Moresby PNG: Government Printer, 1984, p. 27.

¹¹ Using projections mentioned in note 9, the more likely estimates for 1985 are 3,312,100 (no change in fertility and mortality), or 3,328,710 (slight drop in both, continuing as in 1970s). The number of Catholics (citizens only) would then be between 1,026,751 (= 31 percent of lower projection) and 1,065,187 (= 32 percent of higher figure).

case elsewhere. Perhaps, if the next census decides to ask the question, an appropriate way can be found to allow people, who retain their traditional religions, to express their adherence freely, without embarrassment.

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