

# Perspectives from an Evangelical

Robert D. Fergie

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper does not claim to be the official stance of the National Council of Evangelical Churches (NCEC, formally: Evangelical Alliance, or EA), though it was at the request of the NCEC that it was prepared. The primary motivation behind this paper reflects a concern to stimulate more-serious biblical reflection, regarding the spirit of Christ, towards competing ideologies and theologies, in an increasingly pluralistic Papua New Guinea.

The paper has been divided into three main sections. The first seeks to provide a brief overview of various attitudes to the infiltration of pseudo-Christian sects and non-Christian religions. The second section addresses two basic theological issues related to religious freedom, from a biblical perspective. Finally, an argument for religious freedom is presented.

## 2. HISTORICAL VOICES

The related issues of religious freedom and church-state dialogue have a long history in PNG,<sup>1</sup> as they have in other parts of the Pacific independence period,<sup>2</sup> they have been recurring themes, though sadly, each new discussion often appears to be unaware of earlier discussions.<sup>4</sup> Given the growing pluralistic character of PNG, it is not surprising that there have been a variety of responses to the issue of religious freedom, as the following survey demonstrates.

### 2.1 Protectionist Viewpoint

This predominantly defensive viewpoint is often held by older establishment groups. Other newer sects are viewed as threats to the established denomination/religion. Proselytising is perceived as the primary danger to the *status quo* establishment. Guarding of comity agreements (also known as spheres of influence), often become primary agendas, in terms of people, territory, privileges, and theology.

## **2.2 Ambivalent Viewpoint**

This predominantly-introverted viewpoint sees religious politicking as a counter-productive distraction to the primary task of fulfilling one's own mandate well. It is often characterised by a deliberate refraining from drawing attention to other infiltrating sects, accepting, with little resistance, the inevitability of increasing pluralism. On the other hand, ambivalence may also reflect a "head in the sand" nominalism, which, perhaps, demonstrates a vacillating universalism and/or ignorance.

## **2.3 Nationalist Viewpoint**

This viewpoint aspires for the goal of a national religion. A number of the early Christian missionaries to the Pacific espoused the ideal of Christendom for example. A growing number of Islamic states have deliberately legislated to exclude other religions, to varying degrees, in much the same monopoly spirit. In more recent years in PNG, there has been a growing popular resurrection of this Christendom ideal, reflected in the call for all non-Christian religions to be prohibited from establishing ministries in PNG.<sup>5</sup>

This viewpoint appeals to the historical dominance of the Christian faith in PNG since the early 1870s, and to the preamble of the National Constitution, where reference is made to "Christian principles". It also reflects a degree of indignation towards the home countries of some non-Christian tentmaker expatriates (mostly from Islamic nations), where Christians are denied religious freedom. Essentially, the argument is "this is our country, and we aren't going to put up those who seek to exploit religious freedom privileges, denied to Christians in their land".

## **2.4 Open Market Viewpoint**

This perspective does not necessarily reflect an attitude of compromise and diluted theological distinctives, though for some it may. While recognising many competitors for souls, this approach seeks a stable, democratic, socio-political environment, which facilitates the opportunity to promote one's own "gospel" package fairly. This approach seeks the opportunity to win new converts by virtue of the "better" quality of one's gospel package, rather than some unfair legislative advantage.

It is an approach, which believes in the superiority of its own message and ministry, and refuses, therefore, to be intimidated by other market competitors.

According to this view, legislation from the government is best designed to eliminate unfair advantages of one group over another. In the US scene, this principle has been taken to the extreme of prohibiting public prayer in schools.

It would appear that each of these categories do not necessarily reflect theological divisions. In fact, one could make a case, suggesting that various approaches reflect the peculiar historical stage and status of individual groups, who may, at different times, advocate different stances, to suit their current circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

The concern of this paper is not so much that of simply describing the various religious freedom stances. Rather, a more-fundamental question, set in the context of the phenomenon of increasing religious pluralism, needs to be addressed: “Which of these various stances more truly reflects the spirit of Christ and his kingdom’s purposes?”

### **3. TWO IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

To answer this question we now turn to a discussion of foundational Christian principles, related to the issue of freedom of choice.

“In the beginning. . . .”

The Bible records that the climax of creation was the creation of man and woman in the image of God (Gen 1:26-30). They were not there as forced labour, or mindless, manipulated robots. Mankind was created with a special GOD-GIVEN DIGNITY AND VALUE, which set them above the rest of creation. To them was given the special privilege and responsibility of being friends of God, and stewards of His creation. Though the fall (Gen 3) spoiled mankind’s relationship with their holy creator, God’s reconciling love was in no way eroded.<sup>7</sup> The Bible records God’s amazing rescue mission, consummated in Christ Jesus’ incarnation.

“In the fullness of time. . . .”

Even though the chosen Jews so often misunderstood and abused the divine mandate for mission, Christ, the Word become flesh, proclaimed, in word and deed, the reconciling purposes of God (Heb 1:1-2). Though lost in sin, Christ, the Lamb without blemish, paid the ransom, and defeated the enemy through the glory of resurrection, so that the ROAD BACK TO GOD BECAME OPEN TO

ALL who would choose to repent, and be born of the Spirit, being restored by grace to the pre-fall relationship with their creator.

This history of “good news” not only demonstrates the holy, yet loving, nature of Almighty God, it also illustrates the essential character of mankind, as a moral being, created in the likeness of the triune Godhead.

While God made clear the REQUIREMENTS for the maintenance of covenant fellowship, and equipped mankind with the fibre of morality, He also endorsed the FREEDOM OF CHOICE necessary for any meaningful responsive relationship. Even after the fall, God continued to respect mankind’s freedom to choose their own destiny, though with the consequences of good or bad choices clearly spelt out.

1. The first principle to be highlighted here is that the image of God, even in fallen mankind, demands a respect, consistent with the dignity given to mankind by God.
2. The second principle demonstrates God’s willingness to maintain mankind’s freedom to choose spiritual allegiance, in contrast to a dictatorial enforcement of any one religious alternative. This is consistent with God’s eternal purpose that mankind enjoy willing fellowship with their creator. The following biblical passages illustrate this point.
  - a. The offer of life or death (Deut 30:11-20)

In this passage, we are confronted with the most basic decision, which God brings to mankind (vv. 11-14). The context makes it clear that, from God’s point of view, there is only one appropriate response, but that, in the end, each person must decide whether to obey or disobey.

God’s standards and expectations are clear, as are the consequences for decisions of obedience or disobedience. However, God did not force His will on the Jews, other than strongly encouraging them to choose wisely.

b. The covenant renewal at Shechem (Josh 24:14-15)

In this passage, the faithfulness of God to His promises is recounted, followed by a challenge to choose to respond appropriately.

This statement came at a critical historical crossroad for Israel. Again, there was a clear statement of God's standards and expectations, as well as the consequences of a right or wrong choice (cf. vv. 19ff). However, it is clear that, in the end, a careful choice is required by every household.

c. The Light Yoke (Matt 11:27-30)

The New Testament continues a similar theme, though expanding our understanding, in terms of Christ's choice of us (John 15:16). There continues, however, an invitation to choose Christ, as Lord and Saviour. Unlike the religious leaders of His time, Jesus chose not to Lord it over His subjects, and, in so doing, redefined leadership, in terms of a humble, yet powerful, authority, demonstrated through service. He was a man among the people, who called people to Himself on the strength of His character, rather than the size of His army. Matt 11:27-30 provides a classic summary of His approach.

In the said passage, Jesus made it dear that He is the initiator of reconciliation, the one who calls people back to Himself. However, that call does not preclude a willing response on the part of the one being called. Jesus offered an invitation, and a promise (rest), and further explained what is involved in accepting the invitation (yoke). A decision is required, with the consequences explained, not only in terms of rest, but also work and attitude. The gospels offer many similar glimpses of Jesus' invitation to the disciples, and the right responses of His small band of disciples.

d. Other New Testament Passages

The rest of the New Testament presents the bold proclamation of the good news of Christ, calling people to a decision of repentance, in response to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Peter's pentecostal sermon (Acts 2:36-41) inaugurates a continuing process. In contrast to the Jewish and heathen coercion of physical threat, or the discrimination of religious control legislation, the New Testament demonstrates the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, convicting of sin, and enabling true repentance. However, freedom of choice is never obstructed or infringed. People were challenged to make their own decision, in response to the strong claims of the gospel.

Significantly, the New Testament period reflected a situation, where the church was a small and unpopular minority. They were not in a position to lobby for legislation to control religious choices/options, though Paul, in particular, was not afraid to claim civil protection and justice, when under threat of more rule (cf. Acts 23-28, of Paul's hearings before Governors Felix and Festus, King Agrippa, and, finally, Caesar).

The unique approach of Christ, and His early disciples, to the task of extending the kingdom of God conflicts with the approach of so many other religions and ideologies of the past and the present. Jesus, with uncompromising authority, presented the options of obedience and disobedience, in the context of God's revealed character and standards. He did not, however, force people to accept His invitation, but called for a willingness to "take up one's cross and follow Him" (Luke 9:23-27), counting, carefully and soberly, the costs of discipleship.

e. The Epistles of Paul

Paul, in his missionary mandate to the Gentiles, consistently maintained Christ's approach. He did not cut himself off from

the heathen, or the Jews, to whom the message of the gospel was either anathema, or nonsense. He followed a standard procedure: going to the Jews, in their synagogues, first, until forcefully expelled by them. He willingly debated the resurrection at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22ff), again fearlessly calling people to a response of repentance, and new allegiance to Christ.

While the context may be different in contemporary PNG to that of first century Palestine, a strong case can be made, suggesting that the consistent principle of the scriptures focuses on the task of calling people to Christ, rather than instituting prejudicial legislation, which effectively eliminates personal freedom to choose one's own religious allegiance.

This is not to say that Jesus and His disciples were ambivalent about counter-Christian dogma. In fact, the opposite was true (the epistles illustrate this graphically). They fearlessly sought to expose error and deception, as it conflicted with the clear teaching of the scriptures. They were keenly concerned to see the true faith triumph over the many adversaries of the gospel. However, their strategy was not to enact discriminatory political legislation, but to expose erroneous teaching, and then to lead their opponents to Christ, encouraging a willing "crossing of the floor", so to speak, as the truth of God, communicated in the power of the Spirit, brought people to a spiritual crossroad.

#### **4. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: A CASE FOR ACTION!**

In PNG today, there is a strong expression of many people's desire for Papua New Guinea to remain a "Christian" nation. Some, however, feel that the present national Constitution presents an unfortunate paradox, working against the noble goal. On the one hand, it speaks of up-holding Christian principles in the preamble, while later (Section 45 (1)) endorsing the right for people to practise any other religion, so long as it does not violate the rights of others, public peace, or public morality.

The said critics advocate a change of the Constitution, so that Christianity becomes the state religion, by law. Recent events in Fiji have, no doubt, fuelled this view. However, though superficially appearing to have merit, there are a number of serious flaws in the argument, as will be noted presently.

On the other hand, other Christians, and members of other faiths, as well, appeal to the maintenance of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, upon which section 45 of the PNG Constitution is based. Clearly, it is in the non-Christian's interest to be free to practise and propagate, just as the active Christian will seek to do also.

However, rather than becoming pre-occupied with which option(s) will favour Christians over non-Christians, a good number of Christians recognise a number of important reasons why religious freedom must be maintained for all people, irrespective of their peculiar faith, in order for an authentic Christian testimony to be presented.

The following rationale may be developed, in this regard, from a uniquely Christian perspective.

4.1 THEOLOGICALLY, the clear witness of the Bible demonstrates a respect for the dignity of each individual, and the right to be able to choose their own response to the claims of Christ. To legislate, in such a way as to inhibit this freedom of choice, would de-Christianise some of the most basic principles of the Christian faith, devaluing the Christian presence to the oppressive and manipulative levels of other non-Christian religions, as in the case of Islam, for example.

4.2 ECCLESIASTICALLY, the enforcement of Christianity, as the only state religion, would inevitably induce counter-productive nominalism, which, in the long term, could easily strangle the church from within. In this sense, nominalism represents a greater threat to true Christianity than aggressive non-Christian movements. The danger of a defensive, protectionist approach to the challenge of non-Christian religions needs to be carefully weighed as well.

- a. In the first place, it, in effect, concedes that one's religion is weak, and unable to stand against competing non-Christian faiths, without special legislative privilege or bias.



- b. Similarly, it concedes a weakness, and impotency, in contrast to the vitality of faith, demonstrated in the power of God, through transformed and committed lives, as demonstrated through the life of the early church.
- c. It concedes a disease of biblical illiteracy, where our members are easily deceived by subtle heresy, and false teaching, because we, the leaders of our churches, have failed to nurture, feed, and train them as soldiers in God's army, to take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph 6:17), as ambassadors of reconciliation.

4.3 LEGALLY, the removal of general religious freedom could easily prove disastrous, in the event of a shift in the religious status quo, where a competing religious movement became the favoured religion by the government, to the disadvantage of a formerly-dominant group. As Christians, we need to be aware of the danger of shooting ourselves in the foot, not only in terms of our own freedom to worship, practice, and promote our Christian faith, but also in our opportunity to be prophets to the nation, jealously guarding the standards of God, and the rights of our people.

4.4 MISSIOLOGICALLY, there is another very important issue at stake, if religious freedom were to be controlled. Currently, many non-Christian countries are closed to the gospel of Christ by law. It is extremely difficult and dangerous to place missionaries in these countries. This being the case, we need to recognise that Christian witness to expatriates from non-Christian countries represents a significant missiological springboard.

In many respects, these expatriates will be more open to hearing, and receiving, the gospel of Christ than back home, in the security and socio-religious control of their own culture. Conceivably, the most effective Christian witnesses to non-Christian countries will be converted nationals. This represents one very positive reason for Christians to exploit the opportunities of hosting non-Christian expatriates.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

There seems little doubt that there is a clear case for action, with regard to the influx of various sects and non-Christian religions into PNG. However, the most needed change is for inner renewal of the church, rather than an external change of the Constitution.

Should we seek to change the Constitution, by removing freedom of religion, in order to eliminate the threat of non-Christian religions? This paper has come to the conclusion that to do this would, in fact, deny some of the most basic principles of the Christian faith, and could be counter-productive in other ways.

A better approach is to work a lot more aggressively, to strengthen our church members, so that they are growing and maturing in their faith. Then, it would not be us, who are afraid of our sheep being deceived and devoured by wolves in sheep clothing. Rather, it would be the wolves, who would be threatened with extinction, given the out-working of the power of God, through transformed, and committed, lives of our members.

What we need to aspire to in PNG is not more high walls, and barbed wire, to keep the heathen out, but the liberating and expansionist attitude of Paul, who said:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everybody who believes: first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles. For, in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (Rom 1:16f. NIV).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This selected historical survey illustrates the recurring theme, with particular emphasis on the post-independence period in PNG.

1. Comity agreements (BNG 1890; GNG 1891-1899; Highlands 1957).
2. 1978 Control Bill (Stephen Tago).
3. Evangelical response to the Control Bill (Hitchen/Daimoi).
4. 1983 (February) Church-State Policy and Integration Workshop at Goroka.
5. 1984 (February) meeting of PM with the heads of churches (re the role of the Religious Affairs Division).
6. 1986 (May) workshop at Goroka for National Policy on Religion (focus on religious-freedom issues).
7. 1987-1990 MCC Consultation (Charles, Fergie, Zarriga, Kolowan).
8. 1989 tripartite consultation of churches addressing church-state relations (Fr W. Liebert).
9. 1992 meeting of PM with the heads of churches (re a Muslim mosque).
10. 1993 NGO policy consultation (re churches and other NGOs partnership in integral human development).

11. 1993 (November) PNGCC sponsored Seminar on Religious Freedom.

<sup>2</sup> F. L. Douglas, *From Christendom to Pluralism in the South Seas Church-State Relations in the Twentieth Century*, PhD thesis, Madison NJ: Drew University, 1969; John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1982; Noel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace*, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1978; John M. Hitchen, *Training "Tamate": Formation of the 19th-century Worldview*, PhD thesis, Aberdeen UK: University of Aberdeen, 1984; Aarne A. Koskinen, *Missionary Influence as a Political Factor in the Pacific Islands*, Helsinki: Academy of Sciences, 1953; Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua 1874-1914*, Honolulu HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1989, esp. chapter 9: "The Sinister Trio"; Sione Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga: The Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries and Political Development 1822-1875*, Canberra ACT: ANU Press, 1974; Garry Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> In 1992, the National Executive Council endorsed the establishment of a Religious Affairs Division with the Office of Women, Youth, Religion, and Recreation. This division hosted a number of important church-state consultations, addressing the task of developing a national policy on religion for the government. The first consultation was held in Goroka, during February, 1983, and produced a joint statement of views, addressing the issue of religious freedom, particularly. In May, 1986, another major workshop was convened at the same place, this time to prepare a policy on religion for the government. While this document was never tabled in Parliament, it reflected a substantial collection of material related to freedom of religion. (See Robert D. Fergie archives, *Julial Paraha Files #1-2, Church-State Workshop Papers.*) This material is also available from Julial Paraha, Deputy-Secretary of the Department of Religion, Home Affairs, and Youth.

<sup>4</sup> This point was made at some length in a paper presented to the 2nd NGO-Government Consultation, of March, 1993, where the agenda appeared remarkably similar to that of the failed Division of Religion in the mid-1980s. Robert D. Fergie, *Church-State Partnership in PNG, and the Folly of Re-inventing the Wheel*, Port Moresby PNG: Department of Religion, Home Affairs, and Youth, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> This clearly was the motivation behind the 1978 "Religious Control Bill", and became the dominant agenda for the Religious Affairs Division in the mid-1980s. More recently, a strong reaction against plans to build the first Muslim mosque were raised by various mainline Christian leaders to the Prime Minister. Various Pentecostal, Evangelical, and UPNG Student Christian movements have raised similar concerns in 1993.

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting, for example, to observe some of the newer Pentecostal groups, who, not so long ago, were a target of the 1978 Religious Control Bill, now adopting a protectionistic and nationalistic stance towards various pseudo-Christian and non-Christian religious groups.

<sup>7</sup> Gen 6-7 records the new start, through Noah, within the context of judgment through the flood. The rest of the Bible unveils God's missionary exploits, designed to bring back lost mankind to Himself.