

# Islam in Papua New Guinea

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I spent several years in Indonesia, where I often watched television programs featuring melodious Koranic chants, accompanied by images of smiling young people and referring to Islam as a religion of mercy and peace. By contrast, our daily media continuously offer up stories of barbarism, cruelty and mercilessness on the part of Muslims holding up the Koran and shouting verses from it to demonstrate their knowledge of its teachings and their commitment to uphold them. Hence the abiding image in the Western and non-Western media is now of Islam as a religion of violence and terrorism. Which image of Islam is the real one?

Islam as an institution was unknown in Papua New Guinea (PNG) during the Australian administration. There were very few Muslims in the country, and all were expatriates. But things were to change soon after Independence (1975 onwards) as PNG's exposure to the wider world increased dramatically through the phenomenon of globalisation.<sup>1</sup>

The following paper presents data that I collected between February 2013 and July 2014 from Islamic literature and websites, previous research on Islam in PNG, visits to Islamic centres, and interviews with many local Muslims and their critics. My interest in the spread of Islam in PNG stems from the years I spent in Indonesia (1974-87) in close contact with Muslims. Could Islam pose a serious challenge to PNG churches and society in the near future? How should Christians deal with the growing number of Papua New Guineans renouncing their faith and becoming Muslims?

The Beginnings (1900-1990)

The first Muslims to arrive in PNG came as labourers in the early 1900s. They worked in plantations run by German and British colonists.<sup>2</sup> Their presence was again recorded much later in 1972.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, when PNG gained its independence, the Muslim population of approximately 120 was exclusively expatriate, mostly diplomats from Malaysia and Indonesia. In 1977-78, Mohammad Afzal Choudry from Pakistan reported in his 'My Memories of Islam in Papua New Guinea',<sup>4</sup> that there were a few Muslims working in PNG, especially at the University of PNG in Port Moresby and the University of Technology (UniTech) in Lae. They came from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. They were soon joined by a Scottish national and retired Colonel, at that time employed at UPNG, who

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<sup>1</sup> By globalisation we mean the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across all borders.

<sup>2</sup> Burkhard Vieweg's book *Big Fellow man* is based on notes taken by his father Karl in the early 1900s. Karl Vieweg described the presence of Malay labourers (probably Muslims), employed by German Neuguinea Compagnie to work in plantations around Astrolabe Bay (present-day Madang Province). The book, written in German has been partly translated into English by Br Maurice McCallum, Melanesian Institute, Goroka.

<sup>3</sup> This and other information are taken from

<http://www.muslimpopulation.com/Oceania/Oceania/Papua%20New%20Guinea/My%20Memories%20of%20Islam%20in%20Papua%20New%20Guinea.php>, accessed 20 November 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See the above information source.

converted to Islam in 1982 and took the name of Sadiiq Sandbach. According to Choudry those Muslims belonged to the *Sunni*<sup>5</sup> branch of Islam.

During the 1970s, another branch of Islam called Ahmadiya<sup>6</sup> was planted in PNG in West New Britain, allegedly by a Malaysian businessman. Members of the Ahmadiya group eventually moved to Kerowagi District in Simbu, where dozens of Christians embraced Islam in the 1970s and 80s.

In April 1981 an application to register the Islamic Society of PNG (ISPNG) was lodged with the Registrar General's office. The application was challenged by several politicians but was strongly recommended by the then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad during his state visit in 1982. It was finally approved only in December 1983. Its first President was the Sudanese Ahmad Badawi, employed by UPNG.

Starting from 1981, representatives from the Muslim community in PNG took part in the annual international conference organised by the Regional Islamic Dawah<sup>7</sup> Council of South East Asia and Pacific (RISEAP), located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. RISEAP helped establish Islam in PNG from the beginning. It still provides scholarships and accommodation for PNG Muslims both young and old, as well as sending overseas Muslims to visit newly established Islamic centres in PNG.

In the period 1984-88 a bi-monthly newsletter under the name *Al-Islam* was published and distributed through the UPNG Bookstore. Its editor was the Scottish Sadiiq Sandbach and it was printed at the University Printing Press. For the last issue, 800 copies were printed and distributed. In 1988 a house was bought in Korobosea, which became the seat of the ISPNG. The following year the Saudi Ministry of Islamic affairs sent the present Imam Mikail Abdul Aziz, from Nigeria, who studied at Medina University in Saudi Arabia, to lead prayers at the Islamic Centre in Port Moresby.

In January 1986 the first Papua New Guinean to become a Sunni Muslim was the Bougainvillean Alexander Dawia, a UPNG student, who pronounced the *Shahada*<sup>8</sup> at the Jamia Mosque in Sydney, while he was doing research in Australia on Black Theology. He was given the name Bilal, after the name of an early companion of the prophet Muhammad of Abyssinian origin. Towards to end of the same year the UPNG librarian cataloguer Barraah Nuli also embraced Islam with his family. His wife Fatima was the first Papua New Guinean woman to convert to Sunni Islam.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sunni* is the branch of Islam which comprises around 90% of the global Muslim population. They live according to the Holy Kuran and the *Sunna* (i.e. the deeds and utterances of the prophet Muhammad reported in the *Hadits*). The second major branch is *Shia*, which constitutes around 10% of the global Muslim population. They are almost entirely located in Iran and Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> *Ahmadiya* is the name of the Islamic group founded by the Indian Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Kadiani in late 1880. Its adherents are called Ahmadys. In several Islamic countries Ahmadiya is considered an often prohibited heretical sect

<sup>7</sup> *Dawah*, also spelled *Daawa* or *Da'wa* (literally *accusation* in civil and criminal law) is also often given the meaning of "propaganda" or "mission to attract people to the Islamic faith".

<sup>8</sup> The *Shahada* (literally *testimony*) is the Muslim profession of faith: "La ilaha ila-Ullah, wa Muhammadu rasulu-Illah / There is no god but the God, Muhammad is the messenger of the God". The Arabic word *Allah* once meant "The God".

In the following years other Papua New Guinean university students and teachers embraced Islam. And once they returned to their native villages, they started spreading the new religion among their relatives and villagers. In 1990, according to the National Census, there were 440 Muslim residents in PNG, of whom 237 were PNG citizens. Outside Port Moresby (191 Muslim residents), the most numerous groups of Muslim residents (see Table 1) were in Morobe (96), Manus (25), East New Britain (17), Central (16) and Milne Bay (14). The 1990 census did not specify whether the Muslim residents were Sunnis or from other branches of Islam.

#### Development (1990-2013)

In the early 1990s the Muslim community in PNG continued to grow, but at a slower pace than expected. It picked up again in the late 1990s, as reported in November 1997 by the then general secretary of ISPNG Sadiiq Sandbach:

The growth of Islam in Papua New Guinea started slowly in 1986, gradually gathered momentum, reached a peak six or seven years later and then faltered. Of late, all by itself as it were, it has taken off again. In and around Port Moresby there must be 100 families. There are pockets of Muslims in Baimuru, in Daru, in Marshall Lagoon in the Musa valley, all in the Papua Region. There are more pockets in New Britain and New Ireland. It is in the Highlands where growth is beginning to blossom. In the Goroka and Simbu areas there are 250 adults in small remote villages and communities, with the figure growing every day. As this report was being written our Senior Imam returned from a *dawah* visit to the Western Highlands where 20 adults, not previously contacted, embraced Islam. Our greatest need of the moment is people to go and search for prospective candidates. We need trained people in *dawah* methodology. We need someone to train us in how to carry our *dawah* in a nominally Christian land.<sup>9</sup>

They also needed some Papua New Guineans to be trained in Koranic schools overseas. The Nigerian imam sent a request to his former university in Medina, which in 1990-91 sent a delegation to select some young Papua New Guinean men to go and study in Saudi Arabia. More students followed, not only to Saudi Arabia but also to Malaysia, Fiji, Indonesia, and Egypt. Their studies are fully subsidised by Islamic agencies overseas. In the last 25 years dozens—perhaps hundreds—of Papua New Guinean Sunni Muslims have attended short courses on Islam at the abovementioned *Dawah* Council of South-East Asia and the Pacific in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Several Papua New Guinean Muslims have also made the required pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. In June 2014 I found out that several prominent PNG Muslims were invited to attend the World Islamic Conference to be held in Jayapura, West Papua during August.

In early 1990 the PNG Muslim community in Port Moresby was granted a piece of land for a Muslim cemetery and later requested land from the government to build an Islamic Centre and mosque. Their request was backed by diplomats representing the Indonesian, Malaysian and Saudi governments. It was granted in 1992 when the PNG government donated land in Hohola (NCD) to the ISPNG to build its

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<sup>9</sup> Reported in <http://www.muslimpopulation.com/Oceania/PapuaNewGuinea>, under the title “Events in Papua New Guinea”, accessed on November 20, 2013.

Islamic Centre.<sup>10</sup> But it was not until 1999 that the foundations were actually laid. Contributions for the mosque's construction came from RISEAP in Malaysia, from the Saudi Ministry for Islamic Affairs, and from an Islamic faith-based organisation in Indonesia (YASMP). The mosque, which can hold more than 1000 people for the ritual prayer (*salat*), was completed in 2001. The mosque's official opening was attended by representatives of each of the governments that contributed to its construction (Flower 2008: 4).

The Islamic Centre in Port Moresby is located on Malas Street in Hohola, near the Proporena Highway. It consists of a large mosque, two buildings housing the offices of the Islamic Society of PNG, classrooms, a few private dwellings, and a spacious courtyard that could be easily used as a car park. In February 2013 the President of ISPNG was Brother Hussein Barre, a police officer originally from Salt-Nomane-Karimui District in Simbu province.

The 2000 Census gave the figure of 756 Muslim residents, of whom 476 were PNG citizens. Comparisons could then be made with the previous Census.

*Table 1: Muslims in PNG (1990, 2000 and 2011 censuses)*

Province	1990	2000	2011 (RURAL +
WESTERN	8	27	2+
GULF	2	1	13+
CENTRAL	16	8	17+
NCD	191	293	-----
MILNE BAY	14	4	6+
ORO	7	7	88+
SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS	1	7	113+
ENGA	8	0	7+
WESTERN HIGHLANDS	1	25	69+
SIMBU	3	204	589+
EASTERN HIGHLANDS	5	17	7+
MOROBE	96	58	30+
MADANG	1	5	10+
EAST SEPIK	12	2	22+
WEST SEPIK	3	23	7+
MANUS	25	0	1+
NEW IRELAND	0	1	5+
EAST NEW BRITAIN	17	13	4+
WEST NEW BRITAIN	8	65	104+
BOUGAINVILLE	N.A.*	0	0+
HELA**	--	--	47+
JIWAKA**	--	--	211+
TOTAL	440	756	1352+

\*In 1990, no census was held in Bougainville because of civil war.

<sup>10</sup> In December 2013 the website of the ISPNG ([www.ispng.org](http://www.ispng.org)) was not accessible.

\*\*The new provinces of Hela and Jiwaka were established only in the year 2010.

Source: PNG National Census 1990, 2000, 2011.

Various estimations of the number of Muslim followers in PNG were given in the period 2000-2013. An article in the *Post Courier* in 2005 claimed that PNG there were only 1000 Muslims in PNG.<sup>11</sup> The US Department of State in 2006 gave a broad estimate of 1000-2000 followers, without breaking down the indigenous versus expatriate Muslims. On September 2, 2011, the former president of the Islamic Society stated that more than 3,500 Muslim followers throughout PNG were celebrating *Idu-l-Fitr* at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.<sup>12</sup> In 2012, Scott Flower estimated the number of indigenous converts to Islam at 5000 (Flower 2012: 201). During my visit to the Islamic Centre of Port Moresby in February 2013 I was given an estimate of 4000 Muslims, three-quarters of whom were PNG citizens.<sup>13</sup>

While at present the great majority of local Muslims are grass roots people, a significant number are professionals such as teachers, civil servants, soldiers and police, LLG presidents and ex-students from Christian theological institutions. Expatriate Muslims are often highly educated people working in foreign embassies and higher education institutions.

In the last 20 years the Muslims belonging to the Ahmadiya group have been severely affected by the spread of the better organised and funded Sunni group. Dozens of Ahmadys, especially in Simbu, became Sunni, while others, feeling abandoned and opposed, reverted to their previous Christian denominations. It is certainly interesting to find out why these Ahmadiya abandoned their Christian faith for Islam, and why they later abandoned their Ahmadiya faith to join the Sunni community or Christian churches once again.

In 2013, according to the Nigerian Imam of Hohola, the Sunni Muslim community in PNG was served by 15 Islamic Centres<sup>14</sup> led by imams or prospective imams. When the dozens of young Papua New Guineans being sponsored to study overseas in Koranic schools in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Fiji return, they will provide their Islamic communities with much needed leaders (*imam*), teachers, scholars (*ulama*), Koranic jurists (*mufti*) and judges (*kadi*).

#### Objections to the presence of Islam in PNG

Objections to the presence of Islam in PNG started as soon as the application for its registration was lodged in 1981. Several politicians expressed their opposition to Islam spreading in the country. Justice Minister Paul Torato is quoted as having said:

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Flower 2008: 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Post Courier*, 10 April 2005, "Muslims observe day", page 12.

<sup>13</sup> A Report on my visit was published in *Catalyst* 43/1, 115-124.

<sup>14</sup> In the Highlands there are Islamic Sunni Centres in the provinces of Simbu (Kerowagi, Gumine, and Salt-Nomane-Karimui Districts), Western Highlands, Jiwaka, Hela, and Southern Highlands. Islamic communities are also to be found in Port Moresby, Oro, Morobe and Lae. Small Ahmadiya groups are said to be present in Simbu, West New Britain, and Port Moresby.

Islam is in contradiction with the Constitution of PNG; it teaches extremism; it is an immoral religion and if allowed it will cause conflict among the people of this country.<sup>15</sup>

In 1982 the then prime minister Julius Chan said on the radio that he would never allow Islam to exist on the soil of PNG and that he would oppose it with all of the powers available to him. He was supported by the Home Affairs Minister Andrew Kumbakor, who stated:

Islam is a dangerous and very serious threat to peace and unity of this great nation. The advent and propagation of the Islamic religion will be a future time-bomb for PNG. PNG must remain a Christian country for a better future.

In 2000, the then Member of Parliament and future PNG Governor General Paulias Matane stated: "It is not in the interest of this country to have to grapple with a religion that encourages holy wars" (Kapi 2000).

Church leaders also expressed hostility towards the presence of Islam in PNG. Pamphlets were circulated in which it was stated that Muslims must kill Christians in order to go to heaven. Even the Catholic Archbishop of Port Moresby, in 1987, raised his voice against the spread of Islam in PNG. He bluntly asked why the government had employed Muslims at the University: "Were they there to teach students or propagate the religion of Islam?" In a public briefing paper entitled *The incursion of Islam into Papua New Guinea: a warning*, released in 2000, the PNG Council of Churches (PNGCC) argued that the government should protect Christian congregations by banning Islam (IHRC 2000).

Perhaps those who opposed the spread of Islam in PNG were not aware that the few injunctions in the Koran that clearly legitimise violence by Muslims relate to situations where the practice of Islam is limited or banned!<sup>16</sup>

That proposal to ban Islam from PNG was opposed by the majority of the members of Parliament and church leaders, who publicly supported the constitutional freedom of religion in PNG. MP John Pundari spoke for all of them when he stated in Parliament:

We in this country must be aware of our law and Constitution that respects people's rights to choose religious affiliations and the rights of speech and movements within this country. Mr Speaker, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity and every single religion have rights in this world. In our country, by our Constitution, we recognise that right. Mr Speaker, it is not for us to be undermining that individual right of our citizens in this country. I believe that we have to allow tolerance of religion in this country, tolerance and respect for human rights and human freedom. (Pundari 2001)<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre of New York in 2001, hostility towards Muslims also grew in PNG. The mosque in Port Moresby was attacked both by the police and a

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<sup>15</sup> For Torato and Kumbakor quotations see Flower 2008: 5

<sup>16</sup> See for example Suras 2:190-191; 4: 74-77; 5: 33-34; 8: 39; 9: 36; and 47: 4 in the Koran. (Suras are the chapters of the Koran, the Holy Book of Islam.)

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Flower 2012: 206.

member of the public. Muslim converts were harassed in the streets, a few had their houses and *mushallas*<sup>18</sup> burned down and their jobs terminated.<sup>19</sup> Again there were calls on the government to ban Islam entirely (Gibbs 2005). The following year, 2002, Deputy Prime Minister Alan Marat stated that “a sensible government is expected to do something about the violent behaviour of individuals based on their beliefs” and he proposed “changing the country’s constitution to ban so-called violent religions” (Flower 2010: 290).

But this time too the call to ban Islam from PNG was resisted. Even the PNG Council of Churches, in contrast with its previous statements in regard to the spreading of Islam, stated that “Islam had a right to exist in PNG as long as the Muslims did not cause disharmony in the community,” (Sophia Gegeyo, PNGCC chairperson, *Post Courier* 2004)

The case of West Papua was also raised in 2005 by pastor Daniel Shayesteh from Tari as a warning of what could happen to PNG (Flower 2012, Footnote 4). After its annexation by Indonesia in 1963, hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants arrived in West Papua from Java, Celebes and other islands, which considerably altered the composition of its population. According to the 2010 Census, a quarter of all people in West Papua were Muslim.

The cause of Islam in PNG was certainly not helped by conflict in many Islamic countries in the last decade. Continuous infighting and suicide attacks among the different groups and strains of Islam,<sup>20</sup> and the harassment and even persecution of Christian minorities in many countries ranging from Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, to Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, have tarnished the claim of Islam to be a religion of peace. On top of that, murderous attacks perpetrated by self-declared Muslims in non-Islamic countries like the United Kingdom and Spain have prompted the international and PNG national community to continue to depict Muslims as fomenting violence, and Islam as being an aggressive religion.

New criticism against the presence of Muslims in PNG arose in 2013 after the decision of the PNG government to allow the processing of asylum seekers on Manus Island, and their possible resettlement in PNG. Since many of the asylum seekers were Muslim, people were afraid that their resettlement in PNG could create religious tensions. There were again moves before Parliament, introduced by Hela Province Governor Anderson Agiru, to declare PNG as being a country only for Christianity, a declaration which was supported by many Christian leaders across the nation.

In July 2013, an Editorial appeared in the National Newspaper in which PNG people were reminded that according to the PNG Constitution there cannot be any discrimination based on sex, race or creed. And then the editorialist reported statements of Prime Minister O’Neill, according to which his decision to

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<sup>18</sup> *Mushallas* are the small mosques where Muslims gather for communal or family prayers.

<sup>19</sup> I was told about these cases in Kerowagi district, Simbu. Hostility was said to come especially from members of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

<sup>20</sup> The two major groups are Sunnis (90% of the world Muslims) and Shi’ites. The first and biggest schism in Islam—Sunnis vs. Shi’ites—originated immediately after Muhammad’s passing in 632, over whether the Meccan merchant Abu Bakr or Muhammad’s cousin and son in law Ali should succeed the Prophet. Each group has many strains. There are also many Muslim sects that are considered heretical (*bidah*).

allow asylum seekers to be screened in Manus was based on Christian principles, and that to alienate another religion would itself be unchristian. And then the editorialist went so far as to write:

In practice, this country probably needs Islam. It certainly needs the religion's strict discipline, which Christian Papua New Guinea sadly lacks. But some of its extremist tendencies, such as the *jihad* movement, this country can very well do without.<sup>21</sup>

#### Reasons for PNG people embracing Islam

We must distinguish between the reasons that Papua New Guinean Muslims give for embracing Islam and those given by their adversaries. In February 2013 I visited and interviewed leaders of the Islamic Society of PNG in Port Moresby. The reasons they gave were echoed by other Muslim converts in Simbu Province. The first mentioned reason is the good behaviour of Muslims.

Since I became Muslim I behave differently. I do not drink alcohol, I do not gamble, I respect everybody and they respect me. (Muslim leader in Port Moresby)

People see how we behave, how we dress, how we pray, and they enquire about us. (Muslim national in Kerowagi District)

Another reason is the curiosity, both of educated and non-educated people. They were attracted by what they read about Islam or by what they heard when talking with Muslims.

Many people who come to the Islamic Centre [of Port Moresby] are educated adults or students. They deal with Islam in their studies. So they come asking for information and literature. We give them books on Islam and also on Muslim dialogue with Christianity. They then understand that Islam is the right religion. (Muslim leader in Port Moresby)

We certainly meet Simbu people who ask for information about Islam. We give them some and tell them to reflect and make up their minds. Our people are good listeners and they let you talk till the end. (Muslim imam in Kerowagi District)

Theological reasons for embracing Islam are also mentioned, like the absence of difficult dogmas (Trinity, divinity and humanity of Christ, etc.), the beautiful description of Paradise (*janna*), the lack of a priestly caste, and Allah's providence:

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<sup>21</sup>*The National*, July 29, 2013, Editorial: "Time to show how Christian we are".

It is Allah who brings people into his fold. People become Muslim in order to perfect their religion. It is said also in the Koran that Islam's religion is perfecting the Jewish and Christian religions. (Muslim leader in Port Moresby)

Another major reason given for embracing Islam by ex-Christians was given to Scott Flower during his field research in 2007, and also recorded in an episode of the television documentary program *Tok Piksa*, broadcast by EMTV (also in 2007). This was that Islamic beliefs and practices are said to be closer to traditional PNG cultures than is Christianity. I recorded the same reason being given in my interviews of February 2013<sup>22</sup> as well in other interviews. I will deal more extensively with this reason later.

Another important attraction of Islam is that it is said to offer a complete guide for living. Muslims believe that a divine law (*Shari'a/the Way to follow*) governs all aspects of human activities, both public and private, including even food and drink. Sharia is a complete guide for living, developed from Koranic and *Sunna* sources. The all-encompassing nature of Sharia, however, is often felt to be oppressive by both Muslims and critics of Islam.

Embracing Islam is like going to prison. Every aspect of life is regulated by rules, which are not easy to follow, starting from the five daily prayer times to the small details of behaviour, like how to kill an animal, how to behave in the toilet, how to dress, what animals are allowed to be eaten, and so on. (Elderly Simbu imam)

Even if the Muslims I interviewed didn't admit to it, clan membership certainly plays a role in the process of people converting to Islam. In a still-tribal society like PNG, it is natural that clan relations influence people in their choices. The distribution of Muslims in certain districts and provinces is clear proof that kinship loyalty is a factor in people's conversion.

Scott Flower interviewed many Papua New Guinean converts to Islam. He claims that many of them converted out of resentment towards Christianity. He cites several PNG Muslims who said that Christian missionaries came in league with the colonial powers that dominated and humiliated their ancestors, that the missionaries destroyed their traditional customs, and that local priests and pastors were greedy for money. They said that Caucasian Christians still look down on Papua New Guineans and treat them badly. Christian missionaries came with many promises which were not fulfilled, hence the disillusionment with Christianity and rejection of it by converts to Islam (Flower 2012).<sup>23</sup>

Many observers of converts to Islam however, are sceptical of these reasons. They said that converts were more influenced by promises of overseas travel or of scholarships and money. "Free treatment" is

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<sup>22</sup> See *Catalyst* 43/1, 115-124.

<sup>23</sup> Historians think that resentment towards the Church of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire on the part of Middle East populations played a big role in their acceptance of Islam (see Fuller: 2012, chapter 4).

the term often used to describe the material advantages enjoyed by those who embrace Islam. Men are also said to be attracted to Islam because of its acceptance of polygyny. Female converts acquiesce because they customarily follow the religious affiliation of their husbands. Christians were also said to change their religious allegiance due to “big man syndrome” and a desire to stand out. Becoming Muslim is now said to be prestigious because Islamic communities attract interest. Previously ignored *hauslains* become famous and are visited by foreign guests. Lastly, the sceptical observers note that by converting to Islam, people are no longer obliged to comply with many costly traditions like bride price, raising pigs for exchange and lavish funerals.

Comment on the alleged congruencies between Islam and traditional Melanesian customs

Melanesians were said to have a natural affinity for Islam because many Islamic customs are similar to the customs practiced before the coming of Christianity. This claim is linked to the Islamic assumption that, according to a saying (*hadit*) attributed to the prophet Muhammad, and reported by Abu Hurayra;

Every child is born naturally a Muslim. It is the influence of the child’s parents or other agents that makes him or her a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian.<sup>24</sup>

This *hadit* is based on Sura 30 verse 30, which states:

Therefore stand firm in your devotion to the true faith which Allah Himself has made, and for which He has made man. Allah’s creation cannot change.

The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (1990) solemnly ratified those statements in its 11<sup>th</sup> Article, which says: “Islam is the natural religion of created man (*al-islam huwa din al-fitra*)”. As a consequence, when somebody embraces Islam, they are said not to convert but to *revert* to their original status. When we are aware of this assumption we can more easily understand the strategy of Islamic missionaries in PNG of arguing that Islamic beliefs and practices are similar to those held by Melanesians’ pagan (=naturally Muslim) ancestors.

In one of his articles, Scott Flower lists 42 cultural similarities between Islam and traditional PNG cultures that were mentioned to him by Papua New Guinean converts to Islam (Flower 2012: 208). I would like to mention and comment on some of them, particularly those that were also reported to me. However, before describing some of these alleged congruencies, one must ask what culture traditional Melanesian customs are being compared to: pre-Islamic Arabic societies (pagan, Jewish or perhaps somehow Christian), older Islamic societies or more modern Islamic societies? Besides, one must keep in mind that Islamic beliefs and practices (*Shari’a*) are not uniform everywhere. The Sunni *Shari’a* is not

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<sup>24</sup> See *Fitra*, in Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, 108. This statement was also quoted to me by Port Moresby Imam Br Mikail Abdul Aziz.

only based on the Koran but also on the sayings and deeds of the prophet (*hadith*),<sup>25</sup> on the consensus (*ijma*) of the Muslim jurists, and on the deductions made through analogy by Islamic jurists (*qiyas*). In regard to the *Hadith* collections, Bernard Lewis, the famous scholar on Islam has written:

There are hundreds of thousands of traditions and sayings attributed, with varying reliability, to the Prophet Muhammad and interpreted in sometimes very diverse ways” (Lewis 2003: xxix).

On top of that, among *Sunni* Muslims there are also four orthodox Koranic schools,<sup>26</sup> which give a different interpretation and systematisation of all the Islamic sources. And the various groups and strains of Islam also have their own traditions. So, “Islamic” beliefs and practices could differ from place to place and from time to time. Many practices are not mentioned in the Koran but draw any legitimacy they may have from other sources.

Another reason to be wary of gross generalisations is the fact that Melanesian traditional customs are not uniform either. Like the multitude of languages in Melanesia, so are the customs. Big differences in beliefs and customs are found between Austronesian speaking tribes and the Papuan speakers,<sup>27</sup> highlanders and coastal and islands people, and so on. Anthropologists distinguish 15 major cultural areas in Papua New Guinea alone.<sup>28</sup> Let us have a look at some of the alleged congruencies between traditional Melanesian Cultures and Islam.

Alleged similarities in Theological Beliefs: Traditional Melanesian beliefs about the spirit world and Muslim beliefs in that general matter would be similar.

In some traditional Melanesian societies, especially in the Highlands, there was a belief in a Supreme Spirit, often represented by the Sun. However, he was rarely invoked and worshipped. Ancestral spirits were more important and more venerated, while people usually feared nature spirits. Spirits could be good or bad or ambivalent. Melanesians believed that humans had souls. They believed that magicians and sorcerers—who they respected or feared—possessed supernatural power. Many groups also believed that material things like stones and artifacts could also possess magical power. There was no belief in a resurrection of the dead for a final judgment, or belief in heaven or hell.

Muslim theological beliefs can be summarised as follows: the strict oneness of God (Sura 4: 171; 23: 91; 59: 22-24; etc.), presence of angels and demons (Suras 21: 19; 7: 11-13), presence of *Jinns* (lower spirits of nature, Sura 55: 14), reality of the soul (Sura 15: 28-29), presence of prophets (Sura 4: 152), resurrection of bodies and judgment of the last day (Sura 39: 67-70), hell and heaven (Sura 39: 71-74).

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<sup>25</sup> All the deeds and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad are also called *Sunna* (tradition).

<sup>26</sup> The 4 Sunni Koranic Schools are called: *Hanafites*, *Malikis*, *Shafiis*, and *Hanbalites*.

<sup>27</sup> Austronesian languages, stemming from an original population in Taiwan, were introduced in Melanesia only in the last 4 thousand years. They are mainly spoken in the coastal areas of PNG and on the islands.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Bougainville, PNG Islands, Massim, Manus, North Coast, Schraeder-Ramu, Sepik River, Sepik Plains, Torricelli, Ok, West-Central-Southern Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Anga, Papuan Plateau, Papuan Coast.

Popular Islam believes also in magic, sorcery, evil eye, veneration of saints and prayers for the dead, etc. These latter beliefs are not supported by the Koran.

It is noticeable that some traditional PNG beliefs in the spirit world are similar to the Islamic ones, but we can find the same sort of beliefs also in Judaism and Christianity. We know that the prophet Muhammad was acquainted with the beliefs and practices of Jewish and Christian tribes present in Arabia, especially the Jewish ones. Many other traditional Melanesian religious beliefs and practices, like veneration of ancestral spirits, magic and sorcery, carving of statues, cannibalism, punishing of widows, etc., are actually condemned by the Koran and the *Sunna*.

Alleged similarity of Melanesian cultures with Islam as a complete guideline to life: In similarity to Islam, traditional Melanesian cultures provided complete guidelines for all aspects of life.

Traditional Melanesian customs covered the whole of life for the people in those primal societies. But clans had different customs according to many factors: language, place of origin, geographic environment, beliefs, social structure, etc. People were proud of their differences and cultivated them to distinguish themselves from others.

In Islam, *Shari'a* (the Way, divine law) regulates all aspects of life, both public and private, including even food and drink. *Shari'a* was developed from Koranic and *Sunna* sources.

*Shari'a* law is not the same for the 4 Sunni Koranic schools however, or for the many groups and strains of Islam. Besides, Islamic *Shari'a* law was established during medieval times and it is doubtful that it can be applied successfully in modern or post modern societies. We need to be aware that there is a struggle going on between traditionalists and modernists in many Islamic countries over the implementation of *Shari'a* law.

In regard to Islam as a complete blueprint for life, the same could be said for Judaism as spelled out in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jewish law commentaries. In fact, Islamic prescriptions and beliefs are in many ways similar to those of the Old Testament. Even the terms used are often similar, since both languages belong to the Semitic family. However, keeping the focus on Christians, it is sad to see fellow Christians falling back and submitting to a law similar to the Jewish one, from which Christians must profess that humanity was definitely liberated by Christ (see St Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 3).

Alleged similarity in Social Structure: The tribal organisation of PNG societies corresponds to the tribal organisation of Islamic societies.

Traditional Melanesian societies were clannish in nature and small in size. The majority of them did not have hereditary chiefs but "big men" vying for leadership. Many societies were patrilineal but a significant number were matrilineal, tracing the descent groups (clans) through the female line and giving ownership of land to the women. Decisions were taken by the elders. The political unit was limited to clans or sub-clans, with no larger, embracing units.

Historians agree that the pagan Arabic societies at the time of the prophet Muhammad (7<sup>th</sup> century) were strongly tribal in nature, with their hereditary chiefs, patriarchal structure and laws. They were firmly patrilineal with loose councils of elders (*shura*). But things changed after Muhammad got many Arabic tribes to submit to his authority, and established a larger degree of political unity under him. Muhammad and his successors (*khalifa*) were supposed to be the supreme religious and political commanders (Sura 4: 59). Muhammad, at his death (632), was succeeded by his father-in-law Abu Bakr.

Since the very beginning, the so called *Umma* (Muslim society) was composed of many tribes under a supreme chief. At present many Islamic countries are not tribal or patrilineal. The millions of Muslims residing in Cairo or in Jakarta are not ruled by traditional chiefs nor do they show allegiance to any particular tribe or small group, apart from their extended family. Besides, the medieval Arabic tribes, unlike the Melanesian clans, were large, and being pastoral-nomadic rather than entirely agricultural, they claimed vast territories.

Alleged similarity in Gender Relations: Gender segregation in traditional Melanesian societies mirrors the gender segregation prescribed in Islam.

The segregation of sexes in traditional Melanesian societies was stronger in patrilineal clans, with the *haus man* and *haus meri* institutions. Men were generally afraid of women's menstrual blood and of the harm which could be caused by sexual intercourse. The code of modesty did not prescribe that women should cover their whole body or even the head. Exposure of the breasts was quite acceptable, as it still can be now. Men usually wore a beard as a status symbol if they could grow one, but in many Melanesian societies men were not hairy and could not grow a beard. Elders were respected for their experience, wisdom and, sometimes, they were feared for their knowledge of sorcery.

Gender segregation was certainly a traditional pattern among the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian peninsula. We see it today in practice, as well as in the various Koranic ordinances requiring women to submit to their fathers and husbands (see Suras 4: 34; 2: 223. 228). The code of modesty for women is different in Islamic countries but in general, women have to cover their head and body with head scarves and long loose gowns (see Suras 24: 31; 33: 32-33.59).<sup>29</sup> Women may not walk outside the house in the company of unrelated men. When religious Muslim men are hairy they usually wear a beard as a sign of maturity and authority but in some Islamic societies men are not that hairy (e.g. in Indonesia and the Philippines). Older men were respected.

Many Koranic scholars agree that as far as segregation and modesty are concerned, the stringent rules the Prophet Muhammad applied to his wives were eventually applied to all women. Muhammad made those rules to protect women from harassment by abusive and brutal men, which was a problem in the

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<sup>29</sup> The code of modesty may vary from country to country, from a simple veil covering the head (*hijab*) to garments covering the whole body (*burqa* or *niqab*).

pagan Arabic societies of that time. But many women in Islamic societies today are now struggling to free themselves from many of the more burdensome and discriminatory rules of the past.<sup>30</sup>

Alleged similarity in Marriage arrangements: Many aspects of marriage in traditional Melanesian societies are similar to those in Islam.

Traditional Melanesian marriages were arranged by the parents. The man's line had to compensate the girl's relatives for her loss through a bride wealth payment. The bride herself did not receive payment. Other payments to the wife's clan could follow. Polygamy was allowed in certain cases with the consent of the clans involved. Divorce could be initiated by women as well as men. Wives did not live with the husband or with other wives but in separate houses near their gardens. Men avoided sexual intercourse with menstruating wives and also when mothers were still breastfeeding.

The Koran prescribes that marriage should be performed by contract, with two witnesses. (Sura 4: 4) Traditionally marriages were arranged by parents. Polygamy is allowed but restricted to 4 wives, who live in a secluded area of the house (*harem/forbidden*) with other slave concubines (Sura 4: 3).<sup>31</sup> Sexual intercourse is only allowed with married women (in the past also with female slaves). Divorce may be initiated by men or women, but it is made easier if initiated by men (Sura 2: 229-230). Men may avoid sexual intercourse during menstrual periods of their wives (Sura 2: 222). Children belong to the father and follow his religion. Jewish and Christian women may also be taken in marriage by Muslim men, but a Muslim girl may not marry a Christian (Sura 5: 5). The husband gives a payment to his wife (dowry), which becomes her own property (Suras 4: 4; 2: 241). Wives can be inherited when husbands die (Sura 4: 19-24).

Marriages according to Koranic prescriptions are highly regulated and uniform, which was not the case in traditional Melanesian societies. In some Islamic societies polygamy has now been forbidden or restricted (e.g. in Tunisia, Lebanon and Indonesia) on the grounds that in the time of the Prophet it was merely allowed, and allowed because of a scarcity of men, due to wars and other causes. No woman was to be left without protection. In other words, all those prescriptions regarding women were actually part of a process of women's emancipation from the wild abusive promiscuity of the pagan Arabic tribes.

Alleged similarity in food regulations: traditional PNG societies and Islamic societies share similar food regulations.

Traditional Melanesian cultures had food taboos involving totem animals or particular classes of people (clan members, children, pregnant women, warriors, mourners, etc.). Food taboos were not uniform. Pork was eagerly sought and pigs had—and still have—great importance in traditional exchange practices.

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<sup>30</sup> Muslim women such as the Somali woman Ayaan Hirsi Ali have written books about the status of women in Islamic societies, e.g. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's books *The Caged Virgin: A Muslim woman's cry for Reason* and *Infidel: my life*. A film has been made based on the former book.

<sup>31</sup> Another restriction on polygamy is the requirement that that the polygamous man treat all the wives equally. (Sura 4: 29)

Most people know that the Koran distinguishes between permitted foods (*Halal*) and forbidden foods (*Haram*). For example, Islam forbids the eating of pork, the meat of some other animals, blood, and prescribes the invocation of Allah before slaughtering an animal (Sura 5: 3). Wine is also forbidden (5: 91; 2:219; 4:43). It also prescribes a month of daily fasting (*Ramadan*, Sura 2: 185-187)) which includes abstention from food as well as from drink, perfume and sexual intercourse, during the daytime.

Here too we have on one hand a uniform prohibition of certain food in Islam, and on the other hand a variety of food taboos in traditional Melanesian clans. Many kinds of food prohibited in Islam are the same as in Judaism. The Islamic and Jewish cultures share in many things since they both belong to the old Semitic family of cultures, and because Islam was influenced by local Jewish traditions.

Alleged similarity in strict law about punishment: As in Islam, traditional cultures were strict about punishment.

Payback practices were common among traditional Melanesians, who could be brutal in their taking of revenge. The law of an eye for an eye was common, and almost as common was the murdering of widows and accused witches, the total wiping out of enemy clans, torture, and the practice of cannibalism. Pardoning offenders without conditions being attached was unknown.

It is true that both the Koran and other Islamic sources prescribe severe penalties for various kinds of crime: death penalty, cutting off hands, beheading, stoning, whipping, etc. (Suras 4: 15; 5: 33-34.38; 24: 2-3). The death penalty in case of murder is clearly prescribed, as well as blood money (Sura 2: 178-179). Apostasy (*ridda*) is severely condemned in Islamic legislation (cfr. Sura 16: 106-107) and Holy war (*jihad*<sup>32</sup>) is also prescribed in certain circumstances, especially in the case of an enemy attack on Islam (Sura 2: 129; 22: 39).

Modern Islamic scholars, however, explain that those penalties were a corrective to the more barbaric ones practiced in those times by the pagan Arabs. But the Holy Book is also full of invitations to be tolerant and to pardon (Sura 42: 41-43; 7: 119). The concepts of forgiveness and mercy are kept to the forefront of Islamic consciousness by the repetition of the familiar sentence which occurs 113 times in the Koran at the beginning of all but one Sura (the 9<sup>th</sup>): *Bi-smi-llahi r-Rahmani r-Rahim* (In the name of Allah the Merciful the Compassionate). Besides, if one looks at Islamic ethics as a whole, there are more dissimilarities than similarities with traditional Melanesian ethics.

Alleged similarity of other customs and practices: Other customary Melanesian practices like circumcision, hugging, and men walking out in front of their women, are said to correspond to Islamic practices.

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<sup>32</sup> The Arabic term *Jihad* means "effort" or "spiritual struggle" but it has many times been interpreted as military struggle.

Very few Melanesian societies practiced full circumcision of the male foreskin. Several PNG societies, especially in coastal and island areas, practiced various kinds of incision of the penis.<sup>33</sup> Hugging as a way of greeting was common, but here also there was no uniform way of doing it. Men walked out in front of their women, especially when coming back from the gardens<sup>34</sup>.

Full circumcision practices predated Islam and were common among Semitic tribes (Arabs, Jews, Arameans, etc.). In the three Islamic societies which I am acquainted (Indonesia, Malaysia and Morocco), I did not notice much hugging but rather the touching of hands or kissing on the cheeks<sup>35</sup>. Nor did I notice Muslim men walking in front of their wives in urban areas, whereas Christian men on the island of Flores (Indonesia) and in West Papua did.

While interviewing newly converted PNG Muslims, I noticed that some Islamic rules have been adapted. PNG Muslims are said to be allowed to raise pigs as long as they do not eat them, or that they are only allowed to eat “clean pigs”, i.e. those raised within fences. Circumcision is not forced on everyone and the marriage gift to the bride (*mahar*), which should become her exclusive property, can be shared within the extended family in similarity to traditional bride wealth.

In conclusion, there are certainly similarities between beliefs and practices of Islamic societies and those of traditional Melanesians. But those similarities are common to all primal societies, in which the descent groups are of primordial importance, the size of the societies is small, and scientific explanations for natural phenomena are not known. The cultures of Islamic societies have much more in common with those of Jewish societies than with traditional Melanesian ones.

Comment on embracing Islam out of resentment towards Christianity.

To this latest reason for embracing Islam, one could object that it is not completely true that Christianity came to PNG with the colonial powers. The formal division of the present PNG between Germany and Britain happened only in 1884, while some Christianity had already arrived more than thirty years before. As far as Catholicism is concerned, the first missionaries were French or Italians, with no connection whatsoever with the first German and British colonists, who were anti-Catholic in any case. Even when the colonial powers were established, missionaries were often on the side of the people against the abuses perpetrated by early colonists. It is true, however, that the colonial powers generally favoured the spreading of Christianity in PNG, and that in the Middle Ages, Christianity was imposed by force on various populations.

Certainly Islam is currently spreading in PNG by peaceful means, but the same cannot be said of the whole previous history of Islam. Very soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632 C.E.),

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<sup>33</sup> See reports at the “National Policy Forum on Male Circumcision for HIV prevention” convened by the National Aids Council in Port Moresby, 21-22 November 2011. See also an article in *National – Weekender*, November 29, page 11, “More PNG Men now considering circumcision”, by Andrew Vallely.

<sup>34</sup> The reasons given for this behaviour are various: men with lance will protect women; men will not be negatively affected by menstruating women by walking behind; men will not be tempted to sexually assault women.

<sup>35</sup> In some Islamic countries, like South Arabia, men are not allowed to shake hands with women to whom they are not related.

Muslim forces began to move outside the Arabian Peninsula and conquered the regions that now constitute the heart of the so called Middle East: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and the holy city of Jerusalem (which fell in 638 C.E.). In the following centuries Muslim armies conquered many other territories in West and Central Asia, North Africa, Europe (Spain and Sicily), and finally the capital of the Byzantine empire Constantinople (1453 C.E.). That early expansion of Islam was not always obtained by peaceful means and neither is it now.<sup>36</sup>

#### Relation between Islam and Christianity

In the course of history, the relations between Islam and Christianity have been characterised by both tolerance and hostility. In several Suras of the early period the Koran shows tolerance towards other religions: “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (Sura 2: 256; see also Sura 50: 45; 6: 68; 27: 92; 29: 46; 10: 99). “Spiritual emulation” between members of different religions is also supported by the Koran:

If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return all together; and He will tell you of what whereon you were at variance (Sura 5: 48).

The oldest Suras even show some appreciation for the so called “People of the Book”:

Say: people of the Book, you shall not be guided until you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which is revealed to you from your Lord. Believers, Jews, Sabaeans or Christians—whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right—shall have nothing to fear or regret (Sura 5: 68-69; see also 2: 62; 22: 17, 40).

But that early appreciation later changed into open hostility. Jews were blamed for altering the Scriptures (Suras 4: 46; 5: 13), Christians for having forgotten their covenant with God and for believing in the divinity of Jesus son of Mary (Sura 5: 14, 17). The few verses favourable to Christians and Jews in the Meccan Suras have been abrogated by Sura 9: 5 and other Suras (like 2: 216 and 47: 4).<sup>37</sup> “God will destroy the Christians who say the Messiah is God’s Son, and the Jews who worship Uzair as God’s Son (Sura 9: 30). Non-Muslims have to be fought against and subdued.

Fight against those to whom the Scriptures were given but do not believe, neither in Allah nor in the Last Day, who do not forbid what Allah and his apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true faith, until they pay a tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued (Sura 9: 29; see also 9: 30-34; 5: 51).

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<sup>36</sup> When Indonesia annexed West Papua in 1963 there were about 5000 Muslims. Fifty years later they are almost 800,000 (742,122 according to Census 2010, a bit more than 20% of the entire West Papua population). They are made up almost exclusively by “ transmigrants ” from Java, Celebes and other Indonesian Islands. Protestants were 2,264,086 and Catholics 554,008. <http://sp2010.bps.go.id/index.php/site/tabel?tid=3208&wid=9400000000> (accessed 25/08/2014).

<sup>37</sup> The problem of abrogation of previous Suras is a debatable one and depends also on the date attributed to the Suras, i.e. when and where were they recited by Muhammad?

Historically, Christian communities who lived under Islamic rule were defined as *dhimmi*, i.e. a protected minority. They enjoyed basic rights and freedom of worship as long as they paid a poll tax (*jizya*) in addition to the universally levied land tax. They were, however, under significant restrictions:

They were forbidden to proselytise and they had to wear clothing that identified their confessional membership. They could repair their ritual sites but could not build new ones, and could not ride horses or bear arms. (Renard 2005: 29)

Contemporary Islam tends to be viewed by Muslims themselves in two polar dimensions of light and darkness: a religion of peace and moderation that lives with the rest of the world, or a creed of hate and extremism that conspires to create its own world. Muslims who hold the latter view are often called Islamists.<sup>38</sup> For them the world is divided into *Dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam), i.e. the regions of the world where Muslims rule and where Islamic law prevails, and *Dar al-Harb* (the abode of War), i.e. potential regions of war for Muslims, until all are turned into *Dar al-Islam*.

When I asked those who promote a “peaceful Islam’ about the so called Islamists or *jihadists*, who promote an aggressive and violent variety of it, they said that the latter had a distorted view of Orthodox Islam. But how distorted really is this view about the Islamists? Can we not find in the Koran and the *Sunna* enough material to support their aggressive stand? We have already seen some of the Koranic verses that promote struggle against non-Muslims and many more are to be found in the *Sunna*. It is true that Allah is called Merciful but even here the contradictions are many:

One of Allah’s names is ‘Merciful’ (Sura 17, 110) but He can also be merciless (Sura 4, 48). God’s mercy is not extended to all people, since He hates unbelievers, unrighteous, infidels and all those who refuse to submit to Allah as Muslims (Suras 2, 98, 276; 3, 32, 57, 140; 4, 48, Koran 107, 168; etc.). (“Mercy”, Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an Vol III, Brill).

The present exodus of Christians from Islamic countries where they are discriminated against or even persecuted has a long history behind it. Arabic historians tell us that in the year 20 of the Muslim era (642 A.D.) the Caliph ‘Umar decreed that Jews and Christians should be removed from all but the southern and eastern fringes of Arabia, in fulfilment of an injunction of the Prophet uttered on his deathbed: “Let there not be two religions in Arabia!” (Lewis 2003: xxvi-xxvii) In the past 60 years hundreds of thousands of Jews have fled their homelands in Muslim countries from Morocco to Iran. Now it is the turn of Christians leaving Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other countries, while the so called “Arab Spring” looks more and more like an Arab Winter.<sup>39</sup> Recently the world has been witnessing

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<sup>38</sup> Nowadays some of the most aggressive Islamists are the Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas (Palestine), al-Shabab (Somalia), Boko Haram (Nigeria), and the supporters of the so called Islamic State (*Ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyya*). The *Sunni* branch in Saudi Arabia is called *Wahabi*, which emphasises the role of the *Hadits* and gives an extremely literal interpretation of the Kuran.

<sup>39</sup> Not only Christians are fleeing Islamic countries but hundreds of thousands of Muslims as well. Recent research conducted by the Migration Policy Centre of the European University Institute shows that between 2008 and 2013 about 250,000 irregular immigrants reached Europe by sea. They came from the following countries, in order: Tunisia, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Ghana, and Mali. What does their exodus tell us about the human situation in those countries, the majority of which are Islamic?

Islamists recruiting young Muslims from all parts of the world to join the global *jihad* in Syria and Iraq; Islamists kidnapping young Christians in Nigeria and considering them like “war booty” (*sabaya*); and Islamists committing ethno-religious cleansing in Iraq in the effort to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate.<sup>40</sup>

It is true that our Jewish Scriptures can themselves be mined to justify all kinds of violence. The description of Samson’s death in the Book of Judges seems tailor-made to justify suicide attacks. And the biblical injunction to make war on the Amalekites (Ex 17: 14; 1 Sam 15: 2-3) and the various conquests mentioned in the book of Joshua may be used to justify the extermination of one’s foes.

Moderate Muslims call on the need for us to read many brutal passages—those calling for acts of warfare against those who defy Islam—in a non literal way. When I was in Indonesia, I noticed that both the Government and Muslim scholars tried to historicise the more violent parts of the Koran, seeing them in their historical context, as part of a process of liberation from wild pagan customs. The same thing is done for the passages justifying slavery, and the subjection of women.

Literalist readings of the Qur’an that totally ignore its historical context do much damage. Verses related to jihad against non-believers and to slavery and the rights of the women are especially problematic. Reformers argue convincingly that all these were specific stages in a process of liberation of slaves, women, and persecuted Muslims who were originally told to “turn the other cheek” or “withhold your hands” (Sura 4: 77). Ancient and medieval punishments, such as flogging, amputations, beheading and stoning, are another example of erroneous literalism. (Dr Usama Hasan, serious researcher at Quilliam, a British think tank devoted to countering extremism)<sup>41</sup>

Dialogue between Christianity and Islam has been eagerly promoted by the Vatican in the last 50 years. Other Christian denominations have also been promoting dialogue. After the famous speech of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg on September 12, 2006, in which he underlined, that to act violently in the name of religion is contrary to reason and therefore can never be a path to God, two letters were written by Muslim scholars addressed to the Pope and to all Christians. The second letter, signed by 138 scholars and titled *A Common Word between Us and You*, traces out what we have in common and concludes it with an invitation to Christians to interreligious dialogue starting from what we share in common.

In Papua New Guinea, meetings between Christians (mainly Catholics) and Muslims have been conducted for several years now. Representatives of the Catholic Church have been meeting in Port Moresby with representatives of the Islamic Society. The dialogue is still going on, even though some of the principal interlocutors have changed over the years.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> From the Arabic word *khalifa* (deputy, as referred to the Prophet Muhammad (*Khalifat Allah* / God’s deputy) or to his successors. The last Islamic Caliphate, with its headquarters in Turkey, was abolished by Kamal Atatuerk in 1923.

<sup>41</sup> See *The Tablet*, 1 June 2013, page 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> I aim to prepare a longer report on those meetings based on the minutes I am collecting.

But in spite of all the dialogue, one has to keep in mind that the crucial point about Islam's relationship with non-Muslim societies is the fact that the non-Muslims will only be tolerated on a temporary basis. As Bernard Lewis, the famous historian of Islam wrote in this regard:

The logic of Islamic law does not recognise the permanent existence of any other polity outside Islam. In time, in the Muslim view, all mankind will accept Islam or submit to Islamic rule. In the meantime it is a religious duty of Muslims to struggle until this end is accomplished. The name given by the Muslim jurists to this struggle is *jihad*, an Arabic word meaning effort or striving. One who performs this duty is called *mujahid*. The word occurs several times in the Qur'an in the sense of making war against the unbelievers (Lewis 1982: 61).

Besides, the principle of "reciprocity", according to which the rights that Muslim minorities enjoy in non-Muslim countries should be given to non-Muslims minorities in the Muslim world, is sadly not realised but constantly opposed by Muslims. And the sad story of the disappearing of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa is a reminder of what could also happen in PNG if we close our eyes to the danger which Islam represents for our Christian faith and for non-Muslim societies in general.

How to face the challenge of Islam in Papua New Guinea

Over 30 years ago (1981), Professor Maurice Borrmans on behalf of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians published the second edition of *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, which spelt out several conditions for a fruitful encounter between members of the two religions. I quote some of its recommendations.

The *Guidelines* underline that Christians have to approach Muslims with a dialogical attitude, not a confrontational one. Both sides need an honest self-criticism and recognition of their relative responsibility in the tragic Christian-Muslim clashes of the past.

The document insists on the need to study Islam as an indispensable tool to overcome arbitrary judgment and prejudices, often rooted in centuries of polemics. A deep knowledge of Islam demands the acquisition of a basic knowledge of the Koran, Islamic theology, rituals and traditions. Care should be taken too that we do not identify Islam exclusively with Arab civilisation.

The *Guidelines* insist also on the need for Christians to be aware of the Muslim view of Christianity, founded on the presupposition that their Holy Book has given them the solely reliable source of knowledge of Christianity. Therefore, for Muslims, Christianity is not a monotheistic religion, Jesus is only a prophet and precursor of Muhammad – seal of the prophets<sup>43</sup>, the Hebrew Scriptures have been altered and the Gospel too has been falsified since there are contradictions and discrepancies between the Bible and the Koran, the Christian Church is a temporal power like the Islamic community (*umma*) is, etc.

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<sup>43</sup> By 'seal of the 'prophets' is usually meant that Muhammad is the last of God's prophets and that his words are final.

The document highlights that direct contact with Muslims cannot but help Christians to recognise the seeds of God's Word—the rays of truth—found in Islam like submission to *Allah*, God's transcendence and unity, the ritual prayer (*salat*) performed five times a day, the daily fasting during *Ramadan*, the compulsory contribution to charity (*zakat*) as well as the optional contribution (*sadaqa*) , etc.

A Dialogue of life and action should characterise Christian–Muslim relations. There are issues confronting humanity which need a common response by faith communities, like the preservation and integrity of creation, the defence of life and human rights, the dignity of marriage and family, the implementation of justice and peace, and so on. Cooperation of Christians and Muslims in promoting those issues is to be encouraged.

The *Guidelines* stress further the need to discuss the most notorious obstacles to mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims, like marriage regulations, custody of children, freedom to choose one's religion, etc.

The promotion of the moderate form of Islam should be a priority in Papua New Guinea, pursued by both civil and religious authorities. This goal should be helped by declarations coming from Muslim religious leaders that Islam is a religion of peace and mercy that rejects violence and terrorism in its name. Muslim leaders should declare their support for complete freedom of religion, not only for Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, but also for Christians, Jews and other religious minorities in Islamic countries. Similar declarations might help to put to rest the negative propaganda of the present mass media in regard to Islam while enhancing mutual trust, dialogue and cooperation.

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