

*Christianity, Calamity, and Culture:  
The Involvement of Christian Churches in  
the 1998 Aitape Tsunami Disaster Relief*

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In the early evening of Friday, 17 July 1998, three giant waves, each fifteen meters high, crashed into an isolated part of the coast in Sandaun Province, Papua New Guinea. The disaster event was sudden and devastating. With practically no warning, about fifty kilometers of the coast became inundated by the waves: houses were smashed, coconut trees were uprooted, and people were flung, helpless, into the sea. The Aitape tsunami, as it came to be known, killed over 2,000 people, and many more were left suffering.

Such disaster events are relatively common in Melanesia and the Pacific generally. Indeed, there may well be a close connection between increasing vulnerability to disasters and “development” in the Pacific (see McEntire 1999). The number of organizations that seek to provide relief in disaster situations also appears to be on the rise. These organizations are diverse, operating on a variety of scales and within disparate organizational types and sociocultural frameworks. In the wake of the Aitape tsunami, one such group was the Combined Churches Organization (CCO)—a small, ephemeral conglomeration of Christian organizations that provided a distinctive form of relief aid, informed by the local Melanesian culture and the Christian faith of its workers.

In this paper, we aim to highlight the paucity of scholarly research exploring the relationships between Christianity and disaster relief in the Pacific. This task is set in the context of the relationships between Christianity, aid, and development more broadly, which is a limited but growing field. In seeking to address this gap, we provide a case study from Melanesia focusing on the Combined Churches Organization and its

response to the 1998 Aitape tsunami disaster.<sup>1</sup> We position the work of this organization in the context of local, governmental, and nongovernmental responses to the disaster, paying particular attention to the involvement of the Christian Brethren Churches of Papua New Guinea (CBC).<sup>2</sup> While addressing the perspectives and motivations of the CCO workers—thereby moving beyond a focus on merely how relief work is carried out—we also highlight the differing perspectives of the disaster victims and other relief actors in relation to the tsunami and to the relief that was provided. Importantly, we consider the implications of this case study for the practice of effective disaster relief in the Pacific and offer conclusions that seek to create a space for further research in this increasingly important area.

Given the above, the specific objectives of this paper are (1) to analyze the role of religion in aid and disaster relief in this particular case; (2) to assess the factors promoting the role played by the Combined Churches Organization in the Aitape tsunami disaster; (3) to analyze how the organization went about its work and how religion and local culture informed this work; (4) to discuss what motivated the pastors' CCO involvement and to what extent this reflected their underlying belief structures regarding the cause of the disaster; and (5) to relate all of the above to the broader question of the role of religion in aid and development and to provide signposts for future research in the region and beyond.

### CHRISTIANITY, AID, AND DEVELOPMENT

As development studies—and, to a lesser extent, the international development sector—shift their focus toward participatory methodologies, issues concerning the formation of local identities and differentiated epistemologies come to the fore. Axes of identity including class, ethnicity, and gender have increasingly been addressed in both academic and policy settings. Notably, however, religion—as a significant axis of identity—has received very little attention in such endeavors. Indeed, a report by the recently formed World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) states that “we hope to *start* a debate about the ways in which culture and spirituality can be taken into account in development processes” (2001, 2; emphasis added). This is not to say that voices in specifically religious contexts have been absent from discussion of socioeconomic or cultural issues, but rather that these voices have in general been overlooked by the wider development industry, which continues to regard religion as a

peripheral factor in development processes (WFDD 2000). There has also been a corresponding lack of development research that places religion at the center of analysis. Consequently, development practitioners have exhibited little comprehension of the issues involved.<sup>3</sup>

The dearth of attention given to religion and development is troubling for a number of reasons. Of primary concern is the fact that religion is fundamentally important—culturally, socially, politically, and economically—to many in the “majority world,”<sup>4</sup> and that issues of religion are therefore often vital to the way development is perceived and enacted. Second, as Terje Tvedt has pointed out, the current boom in nongovernmental organizations can be traced back to a “missionary phase” of Christian individuals and organization, stretching from 1860 to the 1960s (1998, 44). Many contemporary development projects have their origins in the desire of these people to propagate the Christian faith by building and funding a number of aid and development initiatives, including hospitals, schools, and other formal and informal activities.<sup>5</sup> Reoderick Stirrat and Heiko Henkel have speculated that today’s NGO movement continues to share close similarities with Europe’s nineteenth-century missionary movement—their “doing good to others” remains virtually unquestioned (1997).

The lack of connection drawn between religious roots and contemporary aid and development realities can be attributed in part to the fundamentally secular and materialist nature of the mainstream development industry. This dominant feature of development theory and practice over the last fifty years has remained largely unrecognized despite numerous recent critiques of development discourses and characteristics by post-developmentalists and others (eg, Esteva 1992; Escobar 1995). Gilbert Rist has even suggested that development constitutes a modern secular global faith, with the rhetoric of development’s proponents sharing a number of significant parallels with American evangelistic arguments for religious faiths that promise salvation (1997, 77).

Lately, a number of publications indicate that the religion-and-development debate is starting to open up. In the field of development studies, two areas have been at the forefront: First, the role of Christian churches in African development has received attention from academics (see, eg, Tsele 1997; Meyer 1998; Kamaara 2000; Phiri 2000) and even from the World Bank (Belshaw and others 2001). Second, liberation theology—particularly within Latin and South American contexts (Gutierrez 1972; 1984; Boff and Boff 1987; Berryman 1987; Nickoloff 1993; Beyer 1994;

Bedford 1999; and Allen 2000)—is one of the few religious movements to which social scientists have paid significant attention (Lynch 1991). Kathy Nadeau's recent study of a Basic Ecclesial Community in the Philippines is evidence of the continuing relevance of liberation theology beyond Latin American contexts (1999).

We suggest that one facilitating factor (more in terms of reception than of authorship) in the publication of this material has come as a result of the so-called "postmodern turn" in the social sciences, which revives a sense of openness to the mysterious and the spiritual, challenges the (secular) hegemony of modernity, and celebrates alternative perspectives from the majority world that transcend Eurocentric knowledge constructions. This fledgling attention to religion's connections to aid and development raises the question: Can we discern a "religious turn" taking place in current development research and practice? We argue that such a turn should be encouraged in order to better interpret and understand development processes and practice.

### *Development and Disaster Relief*

Although studies of disasters and disaster relief are always, necessarily, thoroughly interdisciplinary (Kent 1987; Carter 1991, 338), in this paper we situate disaster relief within the broader field of development studies. The close link between the two was initially drawn only in the 1980s (Cuny 1983, 11), but it is now widely recognized in disaster relief literature (see, eg, Mancino and others 2001). The key connection that we stress here is that humanitarian organizations—governmental and nongovernmental—tend to be involved in both development and disaster relief work as they perceive the need.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, continuity exists in the organizations involved, and more importantly, in the vocation ascribed to these organizations.

### *Christianity, Aid, and Development in the Pacific*

Whether or not an incipient "religious turn" is taking place in development in the international arena, the Pacific has been relatively devoid of such analyses. For much of the past century, very few studies focused explicitly on the ideological role of Christianity in the Pacific and its impacts on models or conceptions of "development" or "progress." Academics have preferred to focus on either western missionaries or "exotic" cultural movements such as so-called "cargo cults" (see Barker 1990; 1992).

Although Pacific experiences of Christianity are still on the margins of contemporary research, Bronwen Douglas recently noted that more attention is being given to this subject matter (2001).<sup>7</sup> (See also Forman 1994 and Barker 2001a.)

The marginality of Christianity in development studies in the Pacific is remarkable, given the wide recognition of the role that churches play in this arena. For instance, Anne Dickson-Waiko has argued, “It should not be forgotten that, in Papua New Guinea, it was the churches who in the 1880s introduced education, provided health services, taught new skills and crafts, and brought new goods into communities, roles and activities which are now organized by a variety of government, and aid and development agencies. . . . Many [churches] have built up expertise and experience in developing and implementing projects, some of which are more successful than government-run projects” (Waiko 1999, 45).

A number of other studies have also pointed toward the significant role of churches in the Pacific. Manfred Ernst’s 1994 analysis of new religious groups includes discussion of the socioeconomic roles of these organizations, and Alison Dundon has explored the intimate connection between missions and missionaries, and notions of development among the Gogodala in Papua New Guinea (2002). (See also Douglas 2002; Gewertz and Errington 1998; and Schep 1996).

A few works have dealt explicitly with the connections between Christianity and disaster relief. Anthony J W Taylor outlined how the devastation caused by a hurricane in the Cook Islands was seen by a number of local clergy as a “punishment from God” (1999).<sup>8</sup> Taylor suggested that this perspective was detrimental to the psychological health of the already suffering victims. He concluded that the clergy should be encouraged to change their religious beliefs to a faith more conducive to their future health.

In Melanesia, only a few studies have addressed the role of Christian churches in disaster relief.<sup>9</sup> One such work is Caspar G To Waninara’s analysis of the effects of the 1994 Rabaul eruptions on the Tolai people (1998). To Waninara suggested that of the “three pillars” that upheld Tolai identity—government, tradition, and Christianity—only Christianity continued to play a role in the realization of identity throughout the disaster event and relief process. His analysis pointed toward the overwhelmingly important and influential role played by churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, in delivering aid and support to the victims of the dis-

aster.<sup>10</sup> The lack of studies of Christian groups' efforts in the specific context of disaster relief thus represents a significant gap in development studies of the region.<sup>11</sup>

## THE AITAPE TSUNAMI AND DISASTER RELIEF RESPONSES

### *The 1998 Aitape Tsunami*

The 1998 Aitape tsunami was one of Papua New Guinea's worst-ever disasters (Phillips 1998); globally, in number of lives lost, it was the second most destructive tsunami of the twentieth century (Kawata and others 1999, 101). According to official, provincial government reports, as a direct result of the disaster 2,156 people died, many of them young children or elders (Toyaremwa 1998a). Thousands suffered severe physical or psychological injuries, or both, and many lost their homes and possessions. Approximately 10,000 people were displaced by the disaster. They were forced to permanently relocate to sites, generally near or amidst their village gardens, where new villages were to be built. In addition, the tsunami destroyed or severely damaged five schools, a government post, a number of health centers, some churches, and a Summer Institute of Linguistics translation center.

Collectively, the area most devastated by the tsunami, a stretch of coast about 50 kilometers in length running west from the settlement of Aitape, has come to be known as *ples bagarap* (devastated area). Aitape is located on the north coast of the island of New Guinea, approximately 250 kilometers from the Indonesian (West Papua) border. The four groups worst affected by the disaster were the Sissano, Warapu, Arop, and Malol peoples. Their villages were located directly on the coast, 25 kilometers west of Aitape, around Sissano Lagoon, where marine resources were readily accessible. The waves were most focused and destructive around this lagoon. Those who lived on the spit between the lagoon and the open sea faced the worst situation, as not only were the waves most powerful there but the people had no escape route. As their economy was largely subsistence based, the extensive gardens belonging to these groups were located inland where fresh water and more fertile soils could be found.

The people of *ples bagarap* are predominantly Roman Catholic, with the church having been established in the area for over a century. Tumleo Island, just off the coast of Aitape, was the site of the first Roman Catholic mission to the German colony of New Guinea; the mission station was

initiated in 1896 (Kaima and Nekitel 2000, 11). However, over the last twenty to thirty years, a number of other denominations have also established a presence in the area.

According to Bernard Choulai, the area was entirely unprepared for such a disaster: “The tsunami could not have found a more unprepared and structurally weak area to strike. The province is one of the least developed in Papua New Guinea, with few roads, poor communication links, little industry, and a virtually non-existent government administration” (Choulai 1999, 4). In fact, it was not until two days after the disaster first struck that a disaster relief operation was properly initiated and began to receive funding and supplies. In the weeks following the disaster, Aitape town experienced a flood of disaster relief and government workers seeking to participate in the relief operation.

During this period, care centers were set up. These designated sites operated as relief delivery nodes. The affected population was encouraged to settle temporarily, with their people, at these sites where tents were set up for them, and where both government personnel and NGO workers provided medication, food, and water. The Care Centers continued to operate until the locations for new villages were negotiated and designated—a process fraught with tension (see Kalinau and Smanki 1998)—and new homes were constructed from bush materials. In the new villages, the people primarily built their own houses, although the construction of permanent buildings—community schools, aid posts, and so on—was carried out with the help of outside resources.

Overall, it is estimated that major nongovernmental organizations alone raised about twenty million kina for disaster relief (Nelson 1999).<sup>12</sup> This figure would certainly be greater if government sources and other NGO funds were taken into account, but due to the complexity and diversity of relief providers it is impossible to calculate an exact total. The provision of emergency relief continued for several months, but long-term aid was still being delivered three years after the disaster. Although some donations were provided through PNG sources, most came from international donors (Nelson 1999, 250).

The process of relief provision was imbued with tension and conflict (Toyaremwa 1998b). Many of the victims of the disaster expressed frustration about what they felt was an unequal distribution of resources, accusing some donors of favoring particular groups over others. Groups from ples bagarap frequently aimed charges of corruption and favoritism

at the major and most visible donors: the Roman Catholic diocese and the PNG government. A sense of competition and *skelim* (measuring) between the different groups affected by the disaster persisted throughout the period of aid delivery. In both interviews and also informal discussions, both the providers and recipients of aid expressed deep dissatisfaction with the relief process.

### *The Failure of Local and National Government Relief Channels*

A central feature of the 1998 Aitape disaster was the limited, confused, and ambiguous role played by the central and local governments in the relief process (Swan 1999). Since independence, PNG governmental structure has strongly emphasized devolution and decentralization of authority. This was first enshrined in Michael Somare's "Eight Aims," outlined in 1973 (see King and others 1985). It was further reinforced by the 1994 Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local Level Governments. With respect to disaster relief, the Disaster Management Act of 1986 likewise designated that local and provincial governments should play a primary role in managing disaster relief operations (Kaitilla and Yambui 1996, 62; Choulai 1999, 9). However, the process of decentralization has only ever been partially implemented, and in the case of the 1998 Aitape tsunami disaster relief, neither the local nor provincial governments were in any position to be meaningfully involved, let alone coordinating the process. Both these levels of government were in severe disarray.

Choulai has stated, bluntly, that the local Aitape government "did not participate in the relief efforts because it did not exist during the disaster" (1999, 9). The Court of Disputed Returns had declared the 1997 Aitape-Lumi local government elections invalid in early 1998, and as a result no local government political representation was operational at the time of the disaster.

The Sandaun provincial government was at least functioning at the time, but it too faced serious problems, lacking a provincial administrator. Choulai pointed out that the previous administrator had been "suspended in January 1998, and the position was then occupied by a 'caretaker' who had virtually no power and couldn't direct civil servants or organize funding" (1999, 9). The position was only filled in February 1999. So, for the first six months of the relief operation, no individual was able to provide significant leadership at the provincial level. Another major limiting factor for the provincial government was highlighted in a United Nations Disas-

ter Assessment and Coordination report, which stated that “the province appears to be inadequately funded, even by Papua New Guinea standards, so that its capacity to respond is limited by a shortage of resources as well as poor or inadequate roads and communications” (UNDAC 1999, 14). Indeed, at the time of the disaster no roads linked Vanimo (the provincial capital) and much of the rest of the province (Kuok and others 1998, 6). A final nail in the coffin was the Sandaun provincial government’s past record of misusing finances in the past, through both gross incompetence and corruption (Geno 1987; Boyce 1992, 79–83). This reputation did not give international donors the confidence to channel relief funds through what might otherwise have been considered the “appropriate” official structures.

Although the provincial government did seek to participate in the disaster relief process through forming a Provincial Disaster Committee, its role was marginal and largely ineffective. In fact, after a few months the committee ceased to function, as a result of its complete lack of recognized authority and the absence of significant resources.

Soon after the terrible consequences of the disaster became apparent, then Prime Minister Bill Skate declared the affected area to be in a state of emergency. National Police Commissioner Peter Aigilo was appointed controller and given extensive authority over the area, further shifting power away from the provincial and local governments to the national level. Though legislation dictated that a state of emergency should only be a temporary measure, it was not actually removed until three months into the disaster relief process. During these three months the position of controller was shuffled between three separate individuals, resulting in fragmented and discontinuous leadership. The national government, through the National Disaster Emergency Service, also set up a coordinating committee called the Aitape District Disaster Committee. This committee vied for a coordinating role with various governmental and other organizations.

Importantly, in 1998 PNG government funds were at an all-time low. Over the previous decade the country’s economy had deteriorated to such an extent that at the time of the disaster all economic reports were “full of criticism and despair” (Cox 1999, 6).<sup>13</sup> Of particular interest is that just prior to the Aitape disaster the National Disaster Emergency Service had lost a large proportion of its staff due to budget cuts. The government simply did not have the resources to participate fully in an effective relief

operation without international economic support (Phillips 1998). That financial support however, was not forthcoming. The national government, under the leadership of consecutive prime ministers but especially Bill Skate, had been severely discredited and was widely recognized as “the most corrupt and incompetent government since independence” (Cox 1999, 10).<sup>14</sup> This reputation certainly did not improve during the disaster relief process as accusations of government corruption continued (Nelson 1999, 259). As a result of all these factors, the role the government played during the disaster relief process was very limited.

### *The Roman Catholic Diocese*

The void left by the government’s weak coordination of the relief process was largely filled by the local Roman Catholic diocese, which assumed a major, influential role. It became the major disaster relief organization involved in the relief process, with the Aitape Catholic Diocese Relief Committee even carrying out work that was traditionally reserved solely for governmental authorities, including funding the construction of basic infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, to enable relief delivery. The diocesan committee was able to assume such a prominent role primarily because it became the lead organization to receive and channel funds donated by the national and international community. Donors who refused to contribute funds to national and provincial governments found an alternative channel through the diocese. As a result of this access to finances, the diocesan committee constructed most of the community schools for the new villages, implemented a thorough counseling program, built a number of nursing homes, and carried out numerous other relief activities.

Significantly, however, although the government was not in a position to coordinate the relief process, it did not relinquish its perceived right to do so. As a result, three main committees—the Provincial Disaster Committee, the Aitape District Disaster Committee, and the Aitape Catholic Diocese Relief Committee—contended to play *the* lead role in relief management. According to Edward Kiza’s report to CARE Australia: “All three committees have been trying to manage the rescue and evacuation, relief phases of the management of the tsunami disaster of course with the controller in command. All three players have been planning for recovery programs in isolation of each other” (1999, 8). This situation led to considerable overlap, competition, and confusion in relief delivery.

## THE ROLE OF THE COMBINED CHURCHES ORGANIZATION

The Combined Churches Organization also sought to conduct relief work following the 1998 Aitape tsunami disaster. Unlike the Roman Catholic diocese, the role of this organization was much more limited, and throughout its operations it remained on the margins of the mainstream aid and development industry. Because it existed and worked outside of the discourses employed by the dominant, secular, western aid and development actors, it provides a useful and fascinating case study through which issues of religion, aid, and development in the Pacific can be explored. This section highlights the form this unique organization took and explores the relief activities it carried out at ples bagarap.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date on which the Combined Churches Organization was formed. This is in large part because of the diffuse and fragmented nature of authority within the organization, which has resulted in the lack of a singular official or orthodox perspective. One individual who was heavily involved in its inception in Wewak suggested that an organization bearing the same name—the Combined Churches Organization—was “already in existence” in Wewak prior to the Aitape disaster (Kay Liddle, pers comm, 4 Feb 2002). This “CCO” was interdenominational—as was the later organization—and it “met occasionally on an ad hoc basis” to carry out joint activities, such as “youth” church services or evangelistic meetings. However, in responding to the Aitape disaster, the Combined Churches Organization took on entirely new purposes, functions, and organizational structures.

### *Major Features of the CCO Organizational Structure*

*Conglomeration.* The Combined Churches Organization was a conglomeration of independent member groups, representing primarily an evangelical theological position or heritage, although a number of other denominations and para-church groups were also involved.<sup>15</sup> The member churches tended to be smaller denominations that were already operating in the Sepik at the time of the disaster. A number of contributing organizations were also involved in a more peripheral way, as informal partners, generally through the provision of financial resources.

The CCO structure was only ever designed to loosely connect these autonomous groups together. At points in their disaster-relief work, some groups operated closely with each other, sharing resources, information,

and networks. But at other times member groups could operate almost entirely independently of each other, specializing in a particular project or channeling resources in specific directions. The autonomy of each member group was not compromised by CCO participation. Some important features arise from this weakly structured membership.

First, CCO participation—by both component groups and individuals—was entirely voluntary. No CCO participants received salaries. Some of the pastors who worked with the organization in ples bagarap received a small food stipend for the duration of the time that they were in the area. This amount was intended to cover just the costs of daily living. The voluntary system built on preexisting denominational networks, including expatriate missionaries as well as local church pastors and other respected church leaders. The organization was also nonprofessional, in that none of the members had training or expertise in disaster relief or development.<sup>16</sup> The CCO ethos in this regard appears to have been to use whatever resources were at hand to achieve effective relief delivery. The organization operated largely through informal relationships, with no individual or group signing a contract. Certainly, no constitution was ever created to outline how the relief process would be carried out or where responsibility or authority would lie.

Second, the CCO structure was designed to facilitate relief practice rather than to focus on the organization as such. It emphasized delivering aid to the ples bagarap in the most effective, efficient, and meaningful ways possible. The organizational structure did not exist for its own sake but only in support of this goal. As autonomous groups participated in the organization primarily to enhance the pragmatics of their own separate relief delivery, organizational membership fluctuated. A group might decide that, if a particular task could be undertaken sufficiently without help from the rest of the conglomeration, why involve the others?

Third, in comparison to the other relief organizations operating during the Aitape disaster, CCO financial resources were very limited. Estimates of the total amount of money channeled through the Combined Churches Organization and its component members ranged from 500,000 to 600,000 kina (Andrew Linton, pers comm, 15 Aug 2001; Reggie Howard, pers comm, 21 Aug 2001). In keeping with the informal nature of the organization, no official assessment or audit has yet been conducted of the accounts, to our knowledge. In addition to the official CCO relief bank account, a number of member groups continued to operate their own relief accounts—a further indication of the weak nature of CCO mem-

bership, the continuing autonomous ethos of component groups, and the flimsy internal hierarchy. Although it is difficult to be sure, it seems that the majority of the CCO funding came from either transnational denominational links or specifically religious organizations. Its small size enabled flexibility that larger organizations, more thoroughly engaged with official aid channels, were unable to pursue.

Fourth and finally, the Combined Churches Organization was, and was intended to be, short-lived. As an emergent organization, it was formed in an ad hoc manner in response to the disaster event. Members participated knowing that their involvement, and the organization itself, would be temporary. The organization's ephemeral nature resonated with its fluid membership, as its constituent groups and individuals changed considerably over time. The activities undertaken by the organization also altered depending on the needs and desires of the shifting membership.

*Multicentered.* The Combined Churches Organization was also multicentered, that is, it had a number of different centers of authority, decision-making, and financial control. Each component group, as noted earlier, tended to have a high degree of independence from the others and often controlled their own human and financial resources. There were three quite distinct areas of activity, roughly aligning to three geographical locations: Wewak, Aitape, and ples bagarap.

The primary CCO administrative, managerial, and financial operations were located in Wewak, in the form of the Combined Churches Organization Disaster Relief Committee. This committee—made up mostly of expatriate missionaries—met sporadically for the first three months after the disaster. The earliest committee minutes were dated 14 August 1998. At this meeting Ivan Huasi (from the Seventh-day Adventists) was elected chair and Kay Liddle (from the Christian Brethren Churches [CBC] and Christian Books Melanesia) as secretary. David Aiwung (from CBC) was also appointed as the official CCO representative in Aitape.

The final committee meeting convened on 25 February 1999. The minutes from this meeting recorded how the committee was to be disbanded. A portion of CCO funds was to be spent on a number of specified projects and the remainder would be transferred to the CBC relief account to support its continuing relief work. However, as these minutes suggest, the work of the CCO Disaster Relief Committee did not simply end; rather, it was picked up primarily by CBC national office and by Christian Books Melanesia, both in Wewak.

Aitape acted as an intermediary between Wewak and ples bagarap. The

key figure involved here was David Aiwung—a local man from near Aitape and a strong member of the local CBC congregation. David was supported by a small committee set up by a meeting of the Aitape District CBC leaders (David Aiwung, pers comm, 8 July 2001). This committee was originally designed to help in CBC relief work but under the leadership of David Aiwung expanded to fulfill a much larger role in support of the Combined Churches Organization. The main roles of the Aitape side of the organization were to channel resources to the affected people; support CCO workers who operated in ples bagarap; provide local knowledge to facilitate relief delivery; liaise on behalf of the CCO Disaster Relief Committee with locals, government officials (David attended meetings of the Aitape District Disaster Committee), and other nongovernmental organizations; provide a base in Aitape for CCO personnel in transit; and act as a communication node by reporting information back to Wewak. However, the history of the Aitape committee is similar to that of the CCO Disaster Relief Committee; although the committee did function for a few months, most of its members were unable to maintain extensive involvement over a longer period of time due to other commitments. David Aiwung consequently became the only active member of the Aitape side of the organization. He continued his work for a period of at least three years and at the time the fieldwork for this paper was undertaken, he was still active in his role.

The ples bagarap side of the Combined Churches Organization was almost entirely centered on actual relief delivery. It was founded on a network of Christian pastors who were the key figures in the delivery of various types and forms of relief. This side is discussed more extensively later in this article.

*Religious.* The Combined Churches Organization was fundamentally religious in nature. The various component groups, contributing members, and even the donors were all explicitly Christian groups, the majority having an evangelical heritage. Importantly, religion informed every part of the organization, as both the organizers and the CCO workers expressed a clear desire for the organization to be seen as Christian. David Aiwung expressed the following in regard to the reason for the organization:

PHILIP: Why did you not put the [donated] money into the account, the government account?

DAVID: I think donors who donate money, they are not happy with us putting money into their [government] account, they want us to do the job our-

selves . . . so you see the donors who come under cco they were Christian organizations, Christian firms, so they give money to cco, so we coordinate our programs, we do our [own] work. (David Aiwung, pers comm, 13 July 2001)

The Combined Churches Organization was constructed so as to convey a religious message—it was designed to be a medium of communication. The telling of this religious message was, according to David Aiwung, the “main reason” for the organization. What was this message? It was to “preach salvation in action” or to “preach salvation indirect.” That is, the message was to be articulated without direct and antagonistic proclamation (David Aiwung, pers comm, 8 July 2001).

Another organizer who also shared a similar perspective was Reggie Howard, an expatriate missionary based at CBC national office. Reggie suggested that there was a particular cco “philosophy of ministry.” Although this “wasn’t written down and nobody signed a form and that kind of thing” it was nevertheless agreed to by cco workers. The philosophy was centered on a religiously motivated concern with the suffering of the victims of the disaster. In Reggie’s words:

[W]e need to show concern and love to bring about healing. . . . I don’t know who first had that idea, whether it was David or myself, it was just the obvious thing that we needed to show the love of Christ and this was the opportunity to do it. We need to help people whether they are going to respond or not, we need to help them. (Reggie Howard, pers comm, 14 Aug 2001)

The emphasis here, as with David, was to express the religious message in nonconfrontational and sensitive—but nevertheless “audible”—ways. The message was to be conveyed through both the actual donations given as well as through the network of pastors who operated in ples bagarap.

*Male dominated.* Finally, the Combined Churches Organization was almost entirely dominated by men, with women playing only minor and peripheral roles in the organization.<sup>17</sup> It was men who were primarily involved as part of the pastor network and within the cco administration. In this regard, the organization reflected the wider sociocultural environment, which, as Orovu Sepoe has argued, has tended to exclude women from all levels of Papua New Guinea’s political system (2000). That is, although women are involved in political processes in Papua New Guinea, this involvement rarely takes place in a public, formal, and structured manner. In addition, cco work was regarded as being predominantly “men’s” work—both in its pastoral emphasis and in the types of physical activities

the pastors needed to undertake. Also of concern were various reports, spread widely throughout the Sepik, about women having been raped in ples bagarap following the disaster (Toyaremwa 1998b; pers comm, 15 July 2001). As a consequence, women were seen as being particularly vulnerable at that time.

### *Main Types of Relief Activities*

The Combined Churches Organization was involved in three sectors of relief activity: relief aid, reconstruction, and church planting. In all CCO relief work, it sought to fill niche needs and specifically religious goals.

*Relief Aid.* Prior to the inception of the CCO organizational structure, individuals and organizations that would later become part of the conglomerate were already providing relief aid to the victims of the Aitape disaster. However, over the weeks and months after the disaster a certain system of relief provision evolved. This more organized system was based around a network of pastors who were sent to ples bagarap by their churches for periods stretching from weeks to months and even years. The pastors were key elements in CCO relief efforts. They generally worked in teams of three or more in each major Care Center or in the new villages. Although the pastor network as a system ended a few months after the disaster event, a number of pastors continued to be involved in the area for a much longer period of time.

Importantly, the pastors had a set of regulations that guided their behavior while at ples bagarap. These appear to have been primarily of David Aiwung's invention and focus around religious propagation and cultural and moral appropriateness. The regulations stated that CCO workers:

- Must not preach the doctrines of their church.
- Must not preach anything against any other church.
- Must not attempt to convince anyone that his or her church was best.
- Must not force people to go to church or force anyone to pray.
- Must not work with ladies, especially alone with ladies.
- Would do things in action, because actions will preach to them the love of Jesus Christ. (David Aiwung, pers comm, 13 July 2001)

The pastor network was well suited to CCO needs. It was flexible, skilled in the areas of labor required, based on voluntary labor, efficient in the use of resources, and provided a trustworthy system of goods distribution. Through living and working alongside locals at ples bagarap, the pastors

sought to achieve the key CCO aim of sharing a religious message. Importantly, the pastors did not stay in a village or Care Center unless they were invited to do so. When they did go to a village, they stayed in the home of locals. In this way the pastor network was dependent on the hospitality of the local people.

Three main types of relief aid were undertaken by the pastors at ples bagarap: goods distribution, manual laboring, and pastoral care (David Aiwung, pers comm, 8 July 2001). The pastors were the key on-the-ground distributors of the goods and relief aid that the Combined Churches Organization sought to provide to the affected populace. The stated goal was to deliver the goods to all who suffered regardless of denominational alignment or other links (David Aiwung, pers comm, 20 June 2001; Reggie Howard, pers comm, 14 Aug 2001). The goods distributed primarily consisted of practical items for everyday usage, or what David Aiwung called “basic needs” (pers comm, 20 June 2001). Kay Liddle, in a letter to a donor dated 5 November 1998, discussed how some of the many items had been distributed. Besides clothing for men, women, and children, these “basics” included plastic water containers, saucepans, axes, bush knives, spades, sago strainers, Bibles and New Testaments in Tok Pisin and English, tracts, guitars, tambourines, volleyballs and nets, and soccer balls. These items tended to be relatively inexpensive, and the choice of goods shows a good understanding of what materials were required in the local area, as well as niche needs left out by larger donor organizations. Both features indicate a strong communication system between the ples bagarap and Wewak, where the goods were purchased.

The manual laboring aspect of the pastors’ work took up the majority of their time. The pastors worked alongside the locals in whatever activities were being undertaken, including building houses, planting gardens, and so on. In addition, the pastors were active in constructing new, temporary, bush-material schools for the children. These activities involved heavy manual labor as well as close communication and interaction with the disaster victims.

Pastoral care was designed to meet the perceived spiritual and emotional needs of those affected by the disaster. This involved a mix of personal interaction (including prayer, encouragement, support, and Bible studies) between the CCO pastors and the disaster victims as well as the distribution of items such as Bibles and other religious tracts.

*Reconstruction.* The reconstruction stage centered on the creation of

permanent buildings for Wauroiyn Community School and the Pou Aid Post. The shift in activities from relief aid to reconstruction also signaled a change for the CCO organization. The “combined” aspect of the Combined Churches Organization ceased to be fully operative when many of the component organizations pulled out at the end of the relief-aid phase. It was also at the changeover from relief aid to reconstruction that the pastor network ceased to function.

Liebenzell Mission International was the key organization and primary funding source involved in the construction of the Pou Aid Post. The construction of Wauroiyn Community School was initiated by the Papua New Guinea Evangelical Alliance and TEAR (The Evangelical Alliance Relief fund) Australia, but the Christian Brethren Churches carried out the majority of the organizational work in Papua New Guinea, and David Aiwung was extensively involved in managing the process. Christian Books Melanesia also helped provide finances for small school items. Pou and Wauroiyn received major CCO building projects because they did not receive such assistance from any other group. The reasons for this are complicated and could be debated. The key point here is that the Combined Churches Organization filled niche needs in its reconstruction work as it did in other aspects of relief aid.

*Church Planting.* The final sector of CCO relief activity was what can be termed “church planting.” Church planting was a “relief” activity because it was in direct continuity with, and extensively overlapped with, the other relief activities. Importantly, the work of church planting was not considered peripheral or an add-on to the core CCO relief work but an essential part of the organization’s disaster relief activities.

There were six types of evangelistic activity undertaken by CCO workers: distributing relief aid; giving away tracts and Bibles; autim tok (preaching); praying; forming a Sunday School; and showing the *Jesus Film*.<sup>18</sup> In addition, a number of evangelistic conventions were held by church groups in the area. Although these were not under the CCO banner, they were nevertheless closely connected with the rest of the CCO work.

Although prior to the tsunami disaster there were no CBC congregations in the area, following the disaster three new CBC churches were set up in ples bagarap. In addition, some other denominations (including South Seas Evangelical Church, Evangelical Brotherhood Church, and Assemblies of God) involved in the Combined Churches Organization also set up churches. These churches were formed in consultation with the local people, and although they sometimes received resistance from the

wider (predominantly Roman Catholic) community, they also existed solely at the discretion of the local communities.

## PERSPECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS OF PASTORS AND OTHER ACTORS

### *Differing Perspectives of the Cause of the Disaster*

In responding to a disaster, a key factor influencing behavior and practice is one's perspective on the cause of the disaster—how and why it took place. Garry Trompf has argued that, along with moments of salvation, disaster events constitute the most significant events in every society, because they demand explanation and understanding (1994, 131). Here we wish to discuss briefly three main perspectives on the cause of the Aitape disaster. It is important to understand the nature of these competing explanations, as they conditioned the responses and actions of variously positioned groups in the context of the disaster and led to considerable conflict between donors and others, which will be discussed later in more detail.

The first perspective was that of the “observers.” This was the dominant understanding among the relief organizations, although it was also shared by a number of local people. It was most clearly articulated by western and Japanese academics who helped investigate this hazard “more thoroughly than any previous tsunami worldwide” (Davies 2000, 1). The key question asked by the scientists appears to have been, What “natural” phenomena caused the tsunami? (see, eg, Kawata and others 1999). This question was based on an assumption that the tsunami was a “natural disaster” with no underlying “intentionality.” Although debated, the answer to this question that became the accepted orthodoxy was that the wave was caused by an underwater “slump,” triggered in turn by an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale. The slump displaced a large volume of water, causing a “pocket tsunami” (Smith 2000)—enormous in strength but limited in range (Tappin and others 1999). The waves were channeled toward Sissano Lagoon by an underwater trench. This explanation relied on hypothesis testing and scientific collection of data, and the proofs provided were both textual (scientific journals, brochures) and pictorial (maps of the ocean flood, underwater photographs, diagrams, charts) (see, eg, Kawata and others 1999; UPNG Division of Geosciences 2001). This perspective was the most publicized and also was the most widely held within the western contexts associated with disaster relief.

A second perspective on the disaster was that of the “victims.”<sup>19</sup> For many of those severely affected by the disaster, regardless of denominational adherence, explaining the disaster was more a question of “who” than “what.” Responses in interviews primarily with Arop Two villagers identified the cause of the tsunami as a bomb that had been planted by foreigners. Those who held this view had almost always heard the scientific (observers’) perspective through open-air meetings or pamphlets in Tok Pisin and English, but they rejected it because of alternative, experiential evidence, which they felt the scientific view could not explain. Eddie, a prominent member of Arop Two village, noted, for example: reports of strange sightings of “unidentified objects” and submarines in the immediate months before and after the hazard event; a belief that the wounds inflicted by the tsunami—including burns and cuts that did not bleed—were unnatural; a perception that the waves were particularly devastating in the more densely populated areas; and rumors of oil or precious jewel deposits located in the area, which might have somehow motivated the perpetrators of the disaster (pers comm, 25 June 2001).

The differing perspectives were a cause of tension between the aid donors (observers) and the aid recipients (victims). The donors tended to see the aid being provided as an altruistic gift for those who were victims of the disaster. Most of this aid was short-term and controlled by the donor organization. Implicit in the donor efforts was the assumption that the affected people would “receive” the aid rather than actively participate in its distribution and allocation. This type and process of aid delivery was entirely in line with a view of the disaster as a freak “accident of nature.” But the victims’ perspective led to quite a different interpretation of the relief aid provided. As the disaster was thought to have been intentional, the aid was seen as *compensation* rather than as an altruistic gift. Bernard Choulai’s description of how locals called the aid “blood money” supports this understanding (1999, 20). This perspective significantly informed the victims’ expectations about how the relief should be allocated and distributed, because compensation claims are normally negotiated in terms of what would be appropriate for each individual or group. The process of giving and receiving compensation is an intensely political activity involving public negotiation, participation, measuring, and debate.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the process of disaster-relief provision as informed by the observers’ perspective of the tsunami was distinctly at odds with the local victims’ cultural understandings.

*The Perspectives of the CCO Pastors*

In contrast to the perspectives of both observers and victims, those of the CBC pastors who worked in ples bagarap with the Combined Churches Organization sought to consider how the divine had been involved in the disaster event. Their understandings then informed the process and forms of disaster relief in which they were engaged.<sup>21</sup>

The dominant perspective of the CCO pastors was that God had caused the tsunami to punish Roman Catholics for their lack of Christian faith. Importantly, Roman Catholics were seen as occupying a compromised or nominal Christian space because their actions were not considered to be those of model Christians. The people of ples bagarap were widely reputed to have been strongly anti-Christian and to have pursued *pasin nogut* (wrong behavior). The view that the tsunami was a divine punishment therefore involved dual attribution of the disaster to God and to the people of the devastated area. God had only caused the disaster because the people themselves had disobeyed God or had sinned—their behavior provoked God's response.

The following extract from an interview with James Nonwo, a CBC pastor from Lumi, helps illuminate this perspective:

PHILIP: Why did you want to help? What is your reason for wanting to help?

NONWO: Ok, narapela tingting, as tingting, bikos ol i no save long tok bilong Bikpela. Ol i no save long Bikpela. Olsem mipela go helpim ol long dispela sait in order to bringim gutnuis long ol, touchim ol long tok bilong Bikpela. Em, dispela em as tingting. So taim ol i tanim bel na kam long Bikpela bai sindaun bilong ol i kamap gutpela. God bai blesim ol na sindaun bilong ol bai kamap gutpela. Na taim ol i no save long God ol bai mekim kain kain pasin olsem na mipela tingting disaster i kamap long dispela as. Taim ol i no bilip long Bikpela olsem . . . sin na suffering na destruction i kamap. Taim man, ol laip bilong ol man i gutpela, bai i nogat sampela rong i kamap. Em olsem tingting mipela gat long olsem. So em as tingting bilong mipela helpim ol so mipela ken kisim gospel na go long helpim ol na ol i ken tanim bel na kam bilong Bikpela, kisim bikpela lait na laip b'long ol i stap gut. (pers comm, 5 Aug 2001)

(Ok, another thought, a deep [real] thought, because they don't know about God. They do not know God. So we went and helped them on this side in order to bring the good news to them, touch them with the Word of God

[to make the Word of God meaningful to them]. This is the real reasoning. So when they repent and come to God their behavior [way of life] will become good. God will bless them and they become good. And when they did not know God they did inconsistent [different, various] things and we think this disaster happened because of this. When they do not believe in God . . . and they sin, they receive suffering and destruction. We think this is the reason for the disaster. When men [people] all their lives are good, nothing bad will happen. This is our thinking on this matter. So that is our deep [real] thinking. So the reason we helped them is that we can get the gospel and go and help them and then they can repent and come to the Lord, get the big light and their life will be good. [Authors' translation]

James clearly articulated the way he perceived God as being intimately involved in the disaster event. His purpose in going to ples bagarap was to bring “good news” to the affected populace so that they would convert to Christianity. Once this happened they would be at peace with God and they would not be adversely affected by such calamities as the Aitape tsunami in the future. James Nonwo saw his disaster relief work as simultaneously a process of responding to the past disaster as well as assisting in the prevention of future destruction.

This perspective—that the spiritual/divine punishes humans who transgress moral codes—is not without precedent in the area. In the 1980s, Paschal Yolwo Waisi conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the myths and worldview of the Olo-speaking Lau'um people, residing in the coastal and near coastal regions of Aitape district (2000). One story he recorded particularly resonates with Fountain's research: Many years ago there was a great earthquake followed by a mighty flood and many were drowned in the water. At that time people interpreted it as divine punishment, and the story was retold to others as “a moral guide for individuals to behave according to their norms such as showing respect for one another, and not to be involved in sex outside of marriage as some such disaster may occur again as a punishment handed out to human beings for their wrong doings by some spiritual entities” (Waisi 2000, 23–24). This connection suggests that the pastors' perspectives were informed by a Melanesian sense of reciprocity or payback (see Trompf 1994). This does not indicate that the pastors were *not* evangelical, but rather that they had a *Melanesian* evangelical theology.

In the framework of this Melanesian evangelical theology, it is understandable therefore that the pastors held a holistic perspective: that both physical and spiritual needs required attention. Although the pastors did

not see the spiritual and the physical as necessarily being one and the same thing, they saw extensive overlap and interaction between them. For example, their concern to evangelize the people of ples bagarap was informed by concern for both spiritual and physical realities: while “saving souls” the pastors also perceived themselves as undertaking a type of disaster-mitigation program—ensuring that future disasters would not take place by encouraging the people to conform to a way of life that was in proper relationship with the spiritual or divine.

Most of those interviewed who were involved in this way were pastors from CBC congregations. Many had received pastoral training at CBC Bible schools and were involved in Christian ministry with local churches. Most came from the Sepik area. The spiritual focus of the pastors was not simply put to one side when they became involved in the Combined Churches Organization. Indeed, in many ways their goals—of ministry and evangelism—altered very little as a result of their disaster relief work. What did change were the ways in which they sought to fulfill those goals and the location and people with whom they sought to fulfill them.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR AID AND DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE AND STUDY

This case study is offered in an attempt to fill the gap left by the current paucity of research into religion and development in the Pacific. We have shown through discussion and analysis of the Combined Churches Organization that religion is a crucial axis of identity and does inform attitudes and behavior in aid and development situations.

The perspectives of the CCO pastors shared similarities and differences with other groups involved in the Aitape disaster relief. The pastors’ views were at points closely aligned with the victims of the disaster—such as in the emphasis on reciprocity, the belief in the intentionality of the disaster, and the focus on grassroots and flexible responses to the calamity. However, these two groups differed significantly in the role they ascribed to the divine and in their expectations of how the victims should respond to the tragedy.

Likewise, a comparison between the local-level relief aid, reconstruction, and pastoral care provided by the Combined Churches Organization and more massively funded, larger-scale infrastructural, construction, and other projects coordinated by the Roman Catholic diocese—both groups explicitly Christian and largely of local Melanesian membership—high-

lights a wide divergence in practice and perspectives in disaster relief. It cannot therefore be a matter of assigning generalized signifiers and assuming unproblematic continuity with other similarly labeled groups. Greater attention to specificities and context is necessary.

The Combined Churches Organization is unlikely to be the only emergent or religious organization to participate in disaster relief in the future. Other religious organizations, which in some ways will be similar to the Combined Churches Organization, will continue to participate in disaster relief situations in the Pacific. This is particularly the case in the context of the poorer countries in Melanesia where political instability is currently endemic. The formal mechanisms of disaster relief through government systems are generally in weak or ineffective positions, thus opening up possibilities for organizations such as the Combined Churches Organization to carry out their own kind of relief work. Indeed this mirrors the increasing importance of nonformal political entities the world over, as nation-states become either too small to handle globalization or too large to satisfy their increasingly diverse electorates and their rising or changing expectations. International donors must recognize and work with such organizations.

To work with religious groups in the Pacific donors must have more than a cursory understanding of what motivates and informs their work. It is imperative that further research on such groups be undertaken and the results shared with donor groups. It is also essential that donors realize that their perspectives—although seemingly widespread—are not necessarily shared by those with whom they seek to work. Local organizations may operate according to entirely different sets of values and purposes. Likewise, local populations may have vastly different expectations and perceive the aid in entirely different ways. Understanding that these differing discourses are present in aid and development situations will enhance a donor's ability to successfully negotiate these complex sociopolitical contexts.

We suggest that numerous potentially fruitful avenues of research exist in this critical area. Apart from encouraging more work on disaster relief activities in the Pacific and the role of religious institutions generally, we suggest special focus on the rise of nongovernmental disaster response in the wake of political instability and the particular role of churches in this respect; the role of belief structures in conditioning responses to disasters; the ephemeral nature of such organizations; and the grassroots political economy of disaster relief, with attention to the power relations inherent

in the activities of churches in this context. This latter point is key, for as we hope we have illustrated, the interaction between religion and disaster relief is intensely political at all levels, and the complexity of such power relations needs to be woven into subsequent analyses if practice is to become more locally and culturally appropriate.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

1 The paper is based on the fieldwork of Philip M Fountain, who spent three months in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, June–August 2001. During this time, he undertook qualitative ethnographic research involving more than sixty interviews with various individuals or groups involved in the Aitape disaster relief operation and in the Combined Churches Organization. See Fountain 2002.

2 The Christian Brethren Churches of Papua New Guinea are aligned with the evangelical Open or Christian Brethren movement. For general descriptions and histories of the global movement, see Rowdon 1967; Coad 1976, 1991a, 1991b; and McLaren 1991. The CBC publishing arm, Christian Books Melanesia (CBM), is also addressed in this article, as it, too, was extensively involved in the CCO disaster relief operations.

3 This is especially the case in the study of disasters and disaster relief, where scholars have failed to pay systematic attention to the cultural—let alone the religious (see Webb and Eyre 2000).

4 In this paper, we use the term “majority world” rather than alternative terms, such as the “third world” or the “developing world,” which we deem to carry belittling connotations.

5 See also Luna 2001 regarding the religious origin of nongovernmental disaster-relief organizations in the Philippines.

6 For a more thorough discussion of the linkages between development and disaster relief, see Fountain 2002, 30–34.

7 Douglas’s perceptive analysis and thorough coverage of the anthropological, ethnographic literature of Christianity in Melanesia, as well as the comments and responses her article spurred from many leading academics in the field, are valu-

able contributions to this area of study. However, as John Barker noted in his response to Douglas's paper, there are still extraordinarily few explorations of this topic from academics outside of anthropology (2001b, 632).

8 For further analyses that address the "punishment from God" response to adverse situations, see Wakefield 2001, 38, and Stewart and Strathern 2001, 97.

9 See also Ballard 2000 for a short discussion of the role of Christian missions in disaster relief in Irian Jaya (West Papua) during the 1997–1998 drought, and Waddell 1983 for another brief consideration of the role of mission groups in the 1972 drought in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

10 In regard to "complex humanitarian emergencies," Bobbi Kusilifu has highlighted the role of Christian churches in the Solomon Islands conflict (2002), and John Garrett has discussed the social and religious context of the 1987 Fijian coups (1990).

11 For a useful comparison with this paper, see Hanna Schmuck's analysis of Islamic explanations for floods in Bangladesh (2000).

12 The approximate exchange rate for the period November 1998–January 1999 was 0.47 kina to one US dollar.

13 These economic woes were in part due to the 1997–1998 Asian economic crisis; the 1997 drought, which had limited mining operations in Ok Tedi for up to nine months (Kerr 1999, 57); problematic political circumstances, which saw the government fall out with international banks that did not regard Papua New Guinea as being a reliable borrower (Standish 2000, 1); and a legacy of exploitative colonial structures.

14 Of particular note in enhancing this negative reputation were the 1997 Sandline crises; the increasingly fluid and unstable Melanesian politics, marked by Skate's tumultuous, constant reshuffling of cabinet and of the public service; the release of the Mujo Sefa videotapes showing Skate discussing bribes (followed by the "Jack Daniels Defense": "I was drunk"); the June 1998 Lucas allegations; growing tensions with Australia, Indonesia, and Solomon Islands; and increasing tension between the PNG government and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which eventually degenerated to a temporary but complete halt in relations. See Hayashida 1997; Kerr 1999; de Groot 1999; Nelson 1999; and Dorney 2000.

15 Component groups included Assemblies of God, Christian Books Melanesia, Christian Brethren Churches, Christian Revival Crusade, Evangelical Brotherhood Church, Evangelical Mission International, Four Square Christian Church, Liebenzell Mission International, New Tribes Mission, Overseas Bible Mission, Pacific Island Ministries, Revival Crusade International, Seventh-day Adventist, and South Seas Evangelical Church. In addition, contributing organizations included the Evangelical Alliance of Japan, Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, Missionary Aviation Fellowship PNG, and TEAR Australia.

16 Some CCO workers did have professional qualifications—for instance, in

management, accountancy, or pastoral care—but none were professionally qualified in the disaster relief or development area.

17 CBC women were sometimes asked to help with relief aid—including delivering women's clothing, counseling other women (in keeping with the regulations that forbade men to be alone with women), offering child care, and sewing clothes—but the general pattern appears to be that women were rarely involved in CCO activities or administration (David Aiwung, pers comm, 20 June 2001).

18 The *Jesus Film* is an American dramatization of the life of Jesus, used globally as an evangelistic tool by evangelical groups.

19 This interpretation did not necessarily dominate immediately following the disaster event (Bogdan Zieba, pers comm, 24 Aug 2001; Kawata and others 1999, 101) but during Fountain's stay in ples bagarap and Aitape it was clearly the most widely expressed analysis of the cause of the event. The view that God was punishing the people for their impiety appears to have been expressed quite early on by the disaster victims (Calverley 1998, 6; Dengler and Preuss 1998; Kawata and others 1999, 101; Bogdan Zieba, pers comm, 24 Aug 2001), but this explanation was not articulated by anyone from ples bagarap during the period of Fountain's research.

20 For descriptions of compensation within the context of resource extraction in Papua New Guinea, see the collection of papers edited by Susan Toft (1997).

21 Although a number of different views were also suggested during field research—including from some of the more influential members of the organization—only the dominant view is analyzed here.

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### *Abstract*

This paper considers the links between religion and disaster relief through a detailed case study of the activities of Christian churches following the Aitape tsunami of 1998 in northwest Papua New Guinea. Based on primary fieldwork data,

we argue that Christian religion was central to the way in which the Combined Churches Organization conducted its relief work and to why it sought to undertake it in the first place. A comparison of the perspectives of this organization and of other religious and governmental organizations as to the causes of this disaster and what remedies they should undertake suggests that greater attention should be paid—both by aid and development researchers and practitioners—to aspects of religious belief and the way they inform theory and practice. Much remains to explore concerning the ways religion informs the theory and practice of aid and development, particularly in the Pacific. Through the detailed case study offered here, this paper adds to the fledgling debate engaging with the links between religion and development and calls for the initiation of an agenda toward that end.

**KEYWORDS:** Christianity, aid and development, disaster relief, Melanesia, Aitape tsunami