

## **Research Proposal for Multiple Secularities Fellowship, Phase II.**

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### **Pacific Secularities: Ecologies, Paths, Junctures.**

#### **Project Description**

The island nation-states of the Pacific Ocean comprise many of the (i) smallest, (ii) most ethnolinguistically diverse, (iii) last to be colonised and (iv) most recently independent countries on the planet. Pacific Island nation-states include those of Melanesia in the south-west (Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji), Polynesia in the east (Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Niue and the Cook Islands),<sup>1</sup> and Micronesia in the north-west (Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia). The habitual omission of this region of the world in social scientific enquiry, even in studies on the ‘Asia-Pacific’, led the Tongan scholar Epele Hau‘ofa to refer to the Pacific Islands as ‘the hole in the doughnut’ (Hau‘ofa 1998). For a study exploring alternative histories and forms of secularity, the distinctive experiences of these nation-states provide a field of study that is fertile and yet largely unploughed.

At the level of the person and the group, Pacific societies have been among the world’s most resistant to the adoption of Western secularity as a central cognitive, intellectual, social and political organising principle. The dominance of Protestant Christianity across the region, considered alongside genealogical studies that ground the secular in Protestantism (Asad 1993, 2003) makes this apparent deviation from globalising secular norms especially important. To identify and explore how certain environmental and socio-cultural conditions contour the world’s diversity of secular modalities, Pacific Island states, individually and collectively, present a set of case studies which call out for comprehensive comparative analysis.

As a contribution to Phase II of the *Multiple Secularities* project, the proposed comparative research will explore how the above features (i) to (iv) may explain the early intransigence and later distinctive application of secularity in the Pacific Islands. A key advantage of this study lies in its facility for external *and* internal comparative analysis. Region-wide features that influence a common mode of Pacific secularity (as distinct from the rest of the world) can be further analysed through their subtle intra-Pacific variations. To use the terminologies established by the Project:

- (1) How have the Pacific’s distinctive physical and human geographies affected the ‘path dependencies’ or ‘path probabilities’ for the emergence and authorisation of its distinct

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<sup>1</sup> French Polynesia (including Tahiti) and Hawaii are significant Polynesian island groups but are excluded from this study as sovereignty over these territories lies with France and the United States. Aotearoa New Zealand, with the current dominance of its *Pakeha* (White-European) population in national politics and law-making, also has too many limitations for a study into non-European, Pacific Island nation-state secularities.

Case studies drawn from French Polynesia, Hawaii and Aotearoa New Zealand could, however, be of significant interest to Phase II regarding how Indigenous political and legal claims (such as through treaties) have remade White European secularities outside of mainland Europe.

secular modalities? Or more specifically, how has the particular ecology of (i) population smallness and (ii) ethno-linguistic plurality affected the development of secularity across the Pacific?

- (2) How did the respective ‘critical junctures’ of (iii) European contact (religious and imperial) and (iv) national independence across Pacific Island states stall, advance and differentiate the particular secularities now emerging in these island societies?

### **Background: The Long Road to Pacific Secularities**

The missiologist Charles Forman describes this blue third of the Earth’s surface as ‘the most solidly Christian part of the world’ (Forman 1982). Anthropologists Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall invoke Forman’s description when stating that ‘Christianity shapes the contours of “the political” in Oceania<sup>2</sup> and vice versa’ and that ‘Christianity is the ground and starting point for political action’ (2013, 2) in the region. While clarifying that this does not mean ‘the domain of Christianity and the domain of politics are always merged,’ they add that Christianity in Oceania fundamentally ‘delimits the potential of political action’ (ibid, 3). For example, Fijian narratives for conversion from a ‘cannibal darkness’ to ‘the light of Christ’ in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century is the dominant frame through which contemporary Fijians perceive the social contract itself (Newland 2003; Ryle 2005). Across the Pacific, metaphors of weaved mats and double-hulled *waka* narrate the intertwined relationship between the religious and the secular. However, even such a blurred secularity, still stressing a necessary functional and conceptual co-dependence, presents a major shift from the Indigenous life-worlds before contact with Western colonial powers.

The apparent absence of a secular modality across a pre-contact Pacific is posited in the early anthropological accounts of the region, and later in Indigenous cultural self-descriptions, particularly in juxtaposition to the ‘secular West’. The aim to locate rhyming equivalents to a secular/religion dual in the pre-modern Pacific still remains a credible endeavour. Indeed, the Polynesian binary *noa* (general/common) and *tabu* (sacred/prohibited) – as well as the pan-Pacific *mana* – have a venerable place in the early theorisation of ‘religion’ in the subject’s founding scholarship (e.g. Durkheim 1912; Freud 1913; Otto 1923). The prevailing discourse, however, is to contrast pre-contact ‘holistic’ Pacific epistemologies which did not separate the religious from the secular, against a Western secularity that does. A browse through the ethnographic record helps explain why. In place of soteriological truth, pre-contact ritual behaviour typically pursued technological effectiveness (*mana*) in a world with ancestral Gods, monsters and spirits immanently present. The after-life was most often located horizontally, inland up the mountain, on a nearby island or behind the horizon (Lawrence and Meggitt 1965). In Polynesian societies, instead of the magically-proficient ‘big men’ common to Melanesia, a separate class of magicians or priests might be found, but such ritual specialisation

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<sup>2</sup> Oceania is often given as a synonym for the Pacific, and has been forwarded by some Islanders as a less colonial alternative (Hau’ofa 1994). While I strongly support the ideal of decolonising names and categories, Oceania is often assumed to include Australia and New Zealand and for the purposes of this proposal at least, Pacific Islands is used for purposes of clarity – particularly for a readership outside of the region.

overwhelmingly substantiated divine chiefly power. Where there is evidence of some secular/sacred division of power, such as the symbolic/executive division between sacred and secular kingship in Tonga and Bau (Fiji), even the ‘secular’ king remained dangerously *tabu* for commoners (Williamson 1924). Drought, famine, illness and death were routinely perceived as the result of malign agency, and ritualised practices of plunder and gift-exchange had yet to be supplanted by systems of coinage and impersonal markets. This overall paucity of pre-contact ‘pathways’ for a religion/secular dual meant Pacific subjectivities were especially misunderstood by European Christian missionaries who first arrived as a significant cultural force in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The arrival of Christian missionaries heralded unprecedented culture change across the Pacific, radically transforming Indigenous worldviews, however syncretism and hybridity remained a principal feature of early conversion. While Islanders became increasingly adept at negotiating Europeans’ secularity, they rarely chose to adopt it themselves. Ruling chiefs, bemused as to why missionaries would extol the absolute power of Jehovah but abstain from advising on court matters (Campbell 2003), went on to dominate Pacific churches which not only claimed the prophetic voice, but participated rigorously in politics: leading commissions, influencing elections, fielding candidates and lobbying policies. Early Methodist, Congregationalist and Anglican missionaries agonised over the ‘religious’ sincerity of their new converts, fearing that the material incentives for conversion – from access to literacy to guns – would ultimately deny Islanders their true salvation (Burt 1994). Revivalist movements such as the ‘cargo cults’ in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, along with the region-wide explosive growth of a Prosperity Pentecostalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, suggest that this-worldly advancement remains a significant component in shaping ‘religious’ allegiances in the region (Ernst 1994 and 2005).

Imperial colonialism came later to the Pacific, and likewise, while hugely transformative of Indigenous life-worlds, did less to shake Oceanian epistemologies into their nascent secularities than one might expect. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the dominant colonial power in the Pacific – Britain – favoured indirect rule. Colonial governance utilised the divine authority of chiefs in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga – tracking the same chief-down trajectories of Christian conversion – and entrenched conservative values and customary rank within the apparatus of the state (Lawson 1996; So’o 2008). Many African secularities were shaped by anticolonial independence struggle, with new nation-states distancing establishment churches because of their complicity in the old colonial order. Yet the political culture described by Fijian chief Ratu Mara as ‘the Pacific Way’ led to a more passive introduction to nation-statehood (Mara 1997). Pockets of nationalist excitement rarely burnt hot enough to decolonialise old alliances between church and state, or forge new anticolonial, secularised subjectivities.

Pacific secularities began to sharpen with the gearing up of the institutions of the modern nation-state. Starting with Samoa in 1962 through to Palau in 1994, these *solidly* Christian colonial territories were married off into constitutional democracy (with the notable exception of the monarchic Kingdom of Tonga). National constitutions across the Pacific Islands reference God and Christianity in their Preambles, yet they also enshrine religious freedom and religious non-discrimination in their bills of rights. With this top-down, foreign and anglophone legal

templating of Pacific life-worlds, a discourse of secularity has drawn Islanders to contest the limits and function of religion, particularly regarding its fitness for legislating Indigenous customary beliefs, practices and values. The founding of the region's first universities to train local manpower in the administration of these new states – University of Papua New Guinea in 1965 and University of the South Pacific in 1968 – provided crucial strongholds for the Pacific's new secularity. Previously higher education in the region had been dominated by theological colleges (Crocombe and Meleisia, 1987). The introduction of universities not only publicly authorised the secular differentiation of knowledge, it produced an Islander middle-class whose livelihoods rested on the validity of these knowledge structures.

The politics of a religious/secular differentiation in Island life tracks most visibly along intra-Christian, inter-religious and tradition/modernity lines of conflict, real and imagined. In the name of fighting 'witchcraft' (i.e. bad religion), Pentecostals in Papua New Guinea burn traditional artefacts, which mainline churches and urban liberals seek to preserve as 'Indigenous material culture' (i.e. not really religion at all) (Eves et al 2014). In 2017, Samoan politicians rewrote the constitution to explicitly declare a 'Christian state' – a region-wide first – in response to a 'Muslim threat' more present in world news than from Samoa's miniscule Muslim community (Wyeth 2017). Whereas in 2013, the top-down introduction of the foreign term 'secular state' into Fiji's new constitution – another regional first – entrenched division between iTaukei Christian nationalists and Hindu and Muslim Indo-Fijians, consolidating the power of the militarised state (White, 2020). Legally-enforced Sabbatarianism (e.g. Cook Islands) and village by-laws against women wearing trousers (Vanuatu) or yelling and playing loud music (Fiji) show Islanders carving up Pacific time and space to safeguard Christian traditional values against an encroaching (secular) modernity. While church theologians, a major section of the region's intelligentsia, indict the secular division of being and knowledge in capitalist modernity as the cause of apocalyptic sea-level rise and call for a return to a distinctly *Pasifika* holistic way of life (Halapua 2010; Rubow and Bird 2016).

#### **Four Factors for Comparative Analysis**

My project's comparative analysis will gather the diversity of the Pacific Islands into four primary factors for analysis which both sets the Pacific region apart, but also admits internal variation. It is in this tension of commonality and divergence that a more nuanced understanding of the pathways and junctures of a Pacific secularity can be established.

**I. Scale:** Recent scholarship has argued that very small states operate to markedly different political logic to that of large states (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). A more personal and proximate political ecology merges the public and the private, where leaders hold multiple roles across customary, religious and government spheres. With the exception of Papua New Guinea, Pacific Island states are micro-states (population < 1,000,000), ranging from the smallest, Niue (< 2000) to the largest, Fiji (< 900,000). How might this affect a secular modality? Jack Corbett highlights how a condition of smallness limits the resources available to non-Cabinet MPs and draws churches into politics. As MPs lack offices and must work part-time, Pacific churches stand in as their *de facto* constituency offices, providing spaces to canvass public concerns as well

as administrative resources during elections (Corbett 2013). Given that micro-states (20% of all nation-states in the world) are often missed in comparative political science analysis, how might our understanding of multiple secularities also suffer from a bias of gigantism?

**II. Ethno-linguistic homogeneity/plurality:** The constitutions of the Pacific are written in English, and how Islanders translate English legal terms into their local vernaculars is a profoundly political act. In polities marked by religious division and ethno-linguistic diversity, plural processes of translation can result in competing communities inferring radically different referents for the same legal term. In Fiji, the Indigenous iTaukei translate a ‘secular state’ as a godless ‘worldliness state’ (*matanitu vakavuravura*), whereas in Fiji Hindi, the meaning of ‘secularism’ is given as theistic pluralism. This essentially contronymic use of ‘secularism’ led to practices of intuitive and deliberate miscommunication, further polarising Fijian politics and resulting in a harder separation of religion and state than any Fijian originally anticipated (White, 2020). The Pacific presents an ideal dataset for comparing the effects of plural translations on secular modalities. While Polynesian societies each have a dominant national language, Melanesia is the most linguistically diverse region on the planet, comprising 1,400 different languages (22% of the world’s languages). To what extent are Pacific conceptions of secularism conditioned by and operated according to the *local* politics of plural vernacular translations?

**III. Late colonialism:** The great expanse of the Pacific Ocean insulated Island societies from conquest by Axial Age civilisations right up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. On the one side, this let Indigenous cultures develop as elegant adaptations to their lived environments, ranging from the egalitarian ‘big man’ tribes of Melanesia to the highly stratified chiefdoms of Polynesia, with Micronesia a variegating mix of the two (Sahlins 1962). This cultural diversity met the arriving Europeans on fundamentally different terms, with religious and imperial power typically working through chiefly hierarchies and against big man democracies, respectively merging or alienating Indigenous custom and Christianity (Jolly 1992). On the other side, this timing of intercultural contact meant European colonialism in the Pacific occurred in the latter stages of its New Imperialism, where ideals of the grandeur of Empire and early anthropological science, coloured by racial supremacy, shaped Crown approaches to First Peoples.

The respective character of coloniser and colonised at this critical juncture of inter-cultural contact raises a variety of questions. How did late 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonial policy in regards to Indigeneity and race, labour sourcing and land-ownership influence Pacific Island secularity? Where colonial policy differed across the region, how did this influence a variation between Pacific secularities? How did differences between Indigenous Pacific cultures and their comparative resonance with colonial symbolic worlds lead to distinct secularity modalities? For example, 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries in Polynesia claimed a profitable analogy between Jehovah and the Polynesian Sky-Father deity (Campbell 2003). While in Melanesian Fiji, the absence of such a deity contributed to a non-competitive, integrated pantheon, where ancestor gods – physically located at their *vanua tabu* – vertically interlock with an overarching Christian *Kalon na Cerecere* (God on high). As ancestor gods did not directly challenge the sovereign territory of *Jiova*, local sacred spaces could slot within an encompassing Christian cosmology and resist desacralisation (Dickhart 2005).

**IV. Recent Independence:** How did the experience of independence and postcolonial nation-building affect Pacific Island secularities? Political autonomy across the Pacific Islands arrived later than near anywhere else in the world (1962 – 1992) and was strongly influenced by outgoing colonial interests and agents. Nonetheless, experiences differed in important ways. Full autonomy for the Kingdom of Tonga in 1970, which was more a protectorate than a colony, made little difference to monarchy-rule. Whereas Vanuatu underwent considerable conflict upon independence in 1980. A legacy of joint British/French rule meant ni-Vanuatu not only had to negotiate Catholic/Anglican divisions, but also negotiate independence when Britain was seeking French approval for entry into the EEC. Given the foreign origin of their democratic institutions, Pacific Island nation-states have relied on more-established authorities for legitimacy and governing efficacy, in particular, the chiefs and churches. Customary law and welfare delivery by churches are commonplace across the Pacific. In this light, how have the specific socio-economic conditions prevalent in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century influenced the Pacific's fledgling secularities? For example, the structural reforms insisted on by development actors such as the World Bank, and the major mining projects in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, are often targeted by churches leaders declaiming urban poverty and the desecration of Indigenous land. In Fiji's 2012 constitutional consultations, the submission by the government-in-exile, usurped in the 2006 military coup, explicitly rejected a 'secular state' because of its complicity in a neoliberal and hegemonic 'Global Economic Agenda.'

### Methodological Approach

The four factors of this comparative project are capacious, and the linguistic, cultural and political complexity of the fourteen Pacific Islands formidable. Consequently, in the exploration of each factor (scale, linguistic diversity, late colonialism, recent independence), three national case studies, one each from Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, plus Fiji – my case study of expertise – will be examined.

Focusing on the legal-political arenas of secularity, the research will repeat the methodology adopted in my doctoral thesis, namely, a constitutional ethnography or micro-history for a specific legal issue. More specifically, the research will conduct a longitudinal study into how 'religion' is conceived and regulated in law and the way this legal framing is contested in public discourse and political practice. Through this approach, the study will aim to elucidate and quantify the relative ecological or legacy effects of the four factors on the formation and trajectories of secularity in the Pacific. Primary sources include legal texts such as constitutions, draft constitutions, parliamentary legislation, official colonial policy and court cases, but also rhetorical sources such as submissions to commissions and public statements and speeches by religious, customary and political leaders. The majority of these documents are available online, such as at the Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute (<http://www.paclii.org>), government portals (e.g. Hansard), official church websites, and blogs, as well as from my own digital archives.

In the latter stages of the research, the project will aim to establish an online symposium with local academics based at tertiary institutions in the Pacific through exploiting established

networks at Fiji National University and the University of the South Pacific. This will be especially crucial for exploring the dynamics of ethno-linguistic pluralism on Pacific secularity.

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