



PAPER 16

When 'Acts of God' Strike: Faith responses and leadership in natural disasters in Vanuatu

1 Introduction

Eighty-four percent of the global population identifies with a religious group (Pew Research Centre, 2012) and religious faith is a major motivator for humanitarian work. When disasters strike, religious beliefs provide explanations and encouragement for survivors, and faith-based organisations (FBOs) play vital roles as providers of material and social support. However, to date, limited research has been done on the role of religion in humanitarian response (Fanany & Fanany, 2013). In the Pacific region, the geographic focus of this research, there is a "paucity of scholarly research exploring the relationships between Christianity and disaster relief" (Fountain, Kindon, & Murray, 2004, p. 321) in spite of the presence of one or more Christian FBOs in almost every community. This is also despite the vulnerability of the region to disasters, with five Pacific nations ranked in the top twenty globally for disaster risk (Comes et al., 2016).

The research presented here is part of a larger doctoral project that explores the interplay between faith, leadership and disasters in Vanuatu. This paper relates to a preliminary piece of research, designed to ascertain what particular new knowledge, within the broadly-defined area of faith, disasters, and Melanesia, would be most practically useful to humanitarian practitioners in the region. To do this, interviews were undertaken with ten humanitarian practitioners from faith-based organisations, with experience responding to disasters in Melanesia. The findings from this research were then analysed with the aim of shaping the further direction of the doctoral project, in order that the research might be of relevance to those engaged in practice. A summary of this analysis is presented here.

2 Methodology and findings

2.1 Methodology

This research was qualitative in nature, consisting of in-depth interviews using a talanoa approach. Talanoa is a Pacific research methodology with informal, 'non-linear' and 'responsive' qualities making it broadly applicable in indigenous research (Vaiotei, 2006). Interviews were conducted with ten practitioners (seven male, three female) involved in some way with disaster response through faith-based organisations (FBOs) in Melanesia, whether directly (e.g. as field staff) or indirectly (e.g. as members of a donor agency). This included staff and/or Board members of local and international FBOs in Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand. This sample was purposive and non-random, drawn largely from the researcher's networks as a humanitarian practitioner in the wider Pacific region. Interviews were conducted in English, Bislama and Solomon Islands Pijin. Excerpts utilised in this report have been translated into English where necessary, anonymised with pseudonyms and abbreviated for flow. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis.

The three questions which this research sought to answer, were:

1. What do humanitarian practitioners want to know about faith and disasters in Melanesia?
2. Why do such gaps in knowledge in this area currently exist?
3. How would this information be practically useful?

This paper presents analysis of data from responses to the first question above, deemed to be of most relevance to the future directions of the wider piece of research.

2.2 Findings

In answer to the question of what further research, within the broad area of faith and disasters in Melanesia, would be helpful for their practice, responses from practitioners fell into two broad areas. Respondents wanted to further understand:

1. the influence of faith on affected populations as they seek to make sense of, and respond to, disasters (i.e. examining the beliefs themselves); and
2. the unique role of faith-based organisations in Melanesia, when disasters hit (i.e. examining the institutional structures through which people's beliefs are expressed).

The following sections analyse participants' responses under these two categories as potential areas for further research, with further, more specific, sub-categories provided under each one.

Area for further research 1.0:

Influences of spiritual beliefs on responses to disaster in Melanesia

A clear theme which came through from the interviews was the prevailing influence of spiritual beliefs, primarily Christian and animist, on the lives of Melanesians in general. More specifically, there was a desire from humanitarian practitioners to understand how this plays out in times of disaster, recognising that a lot of anecdotal evidence exists on this, but to date, very little literature. In Melanesian countries such as Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, upwards of 80% of the population identify as Christian, and in many cases kastom, a system of traditional beliefs and practices, is also a core part of their spirituality. As anthropologist Nehrbass notes of a particular island, Tanna, in Vanuatu: "islanders integrate the church with their traditional religion, called kastom. Many Tannese attend church and yet continue to identify with kastom" (2012, p. xvii). As Fr. William, a Melanesian religious leader and FBO worker interviewed in this research, explained: "church didn't do away with culture. Church and culture, the two go hand-in-hand."

It is therefore not surprising that these two sources of spiritual beliefs – Christianity and kastom - were identified as critical areas to understand, when considering how people's beliefs influence their responses to natural disaster. Christopher, a participant from a donor-country non-government organisation (NGO), wondered with reference to Melanesian communities:

You know, even focusing on Christian communities, what do they actually do when a cyclone is brewing? And is it "OK, well we've prayed but you know, we also need to go to these guys [kastom leaders]" or do they find a Christian equivalent of that? Does the pastor have to become the shaman who then performs you know, what the community needs? Or, does somebody pop up and say, umm, "Folks, look, you know, I've studied meteorology at the University of the South Pacific and this is something we need to do"...?

Further, as the above quote also highlights, beyond these two prevailing sources of spiritual beliefs, there are also other influences which may come into play: in this case, scientific. Additional influences on belief systems identified by participants were those of other religions and 'cargo cults.' Emma, another donor-country NGO worker, noted that "it'd be good to understand ... different faiths and the perspectives [they have on] disasters," giving the example of Islamic beliefs and their influence on disaster preparedness in another context she was familiar with. Given that disaster-affected areas such as Tanna in Vanuatu have Muslim populations, albeit small, and that Muslim groups have provided aid to disaster-affected populations there, this and other world religions pose an interesting area for exploration as Clarke (2016) has previously highlighted. Another participant commented on so-called 'cargo cults,' religious groups present in some parts of Melanesia where "there is a strong tradition of a particular way of understanding faith, in terms of material help arriving from overseas," as having particular implications for understanding disasters and the humanitarian aid which often follows.

Participants also expressed a desire to understand more about how spiritual beliefs worked for or against risk-mitigating behaviour in times of disaster, with different hypotheses based on their individual observations. For

example, Emma suggested that the apocalyptic beliefs of the denominational NGO she worked for might contribute positively to people's disaster preparedness, because "it's like, we know it's gonna happen, so why don't we do something to help ourselves?" However, another respondent, Christopher, had a different hypothesis when it came to apocalyptic beliefs and their impact upon preparedness, asking: "What is the point of being prepared for something that inevitably will engulf the whole earth?" These different hypotheses, based largely on the practitioners' personal experiences and observations, highlight the need for further research into the way in which such beliefs work for or against disaster-mitigating behaviours.

Overall, within this broader topic of understanding the influences of people's spiritual beliefs and how they come into play with regards to natural disasters, three sub-areas for further research were identified: the impact of beliefs on disaster preparedness; the role of beliefs in providing explanation for disasters' occurrence; and the role and impact of beliefs in coping post-disaster. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse these individually here, however the findings have been fed into the design of the wider doctoral thesis, which will incorporate an examination of the influence of spiritual beliefs, with a focus on Christian and kastom ones, across the disaster management cycle.

Area for further research 2.0:

The role of faith-based organisations in disaster response in Melanesia

As well as the interplay between belief systems and disasters, many humanitarian practitioners interviewed were also interested in understanding the interplay between faith-based organisations – that is, the formal structures through which such belief systems are expressed – and disasters. In the Melanesian context, faith-based organisations (FBOs) include churches, faith-based NGOs and umbrella bodies such as the Vanuatu Christian Council. It is well-known that these organisations are active during times of disaster, however very little research has been done into the exact nature of their activity; their strengths and limitations as faith-based responders; their motives; the way in which they engage in coordination with other humanitarian actors, or how this might be improved. These four areas listed here were the main areas where further research would be helpful, according to the humanitarian practitioners interviewed.

These particular areas of interest seem to stem primarily from two motives: first, a desire from humanitarian practitioners working in FBOs to demonstrate their effectiveness, and second, a desire for continual improvement. The first motive for further research was summed up by one respondent who expressed his wish to demonstrate to Western-country donors that "we're functioning rationally and not in a sort-of misty metaphysics which defies comprehension to the conventional thinker." At the same time, humanitarian practitioners recognised that FBOs had unique strengths which set them apart from other responding agencies, yet which often went unrecognised by external stakeholders, and at times, unrealised by the organisations themselves. One respondent cited the opportunity for churches to fill gaps in provision of psycho-social support, as a locally-appropriate source of such assistance but where the training currently did not exist. Another area for improvement was the area of coordination, with one practitioner stating: "Often my sense is that faith-based agencies don't have the capacity to engage in training and coordination meetings [held by other stakeholders] as INGOs might." One potential avenue for exploring this area would be to document and analyse the inter-denominational Church Working Group established following Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, a new model that was widely considered successful in establishing greater coordination between churches and the government at the national level.

3 Summary and Conclusion

As is reflected in the comments analysed above, it is clear that there is a desire amongst humanitarian practitioners for further research within the broad area of faith and disasters in Melanesia. Such research is of interest both for the potential it holds to establish legitimacy for faith-based actors, as well as for the potential to improve practice, through critically examining approaches to provision of humanitarian assistance. As the humanitarian world increasingly emphasises 'localisation' (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016), local faith groups are likely to find themselves moving from the margins to the spotlight, further underscoring the need for relevant research regarding their effectiveness. A strong theme also evident in this research was the overwhelming

influence of spiritual beliefs on Melanesians' lives, and the importance, to humanitarian practitioners, of understanding how this plays out in times of disaster. As one research participant, a Melanesian NGO worker called Grace, expressed:

I think it's a really great [research] topic, because of the context that the Melanesian countries are in. Like, we are very spiritual people, like whether it be spiritual in terms of kastom, or spiritual in terms of church. And it's often that's overlooked. And yet, that's what gives strength to somebody, uh? Because that sort of keeps them hoping for tomorrow. It's the spiritual side of somebody that has them hoping for a better tomorrow. So it is just good that you bring it out, that you [are] gonna be doing this [research] and bringing it out for us to see. I think it's an important [thing].

It is this overwhelming influence of spiritual beliefs in Melanesia, coupled with the lack of research on its relationship to disasters, in spite of the region's high vulnerability to such events, which makes future research in this area of interest to practitioners. As another research participant said: "It's a totally new area of research, which – as we know that Vanuatu is classified as the country which is more prone to disasters than any other country in the world – will help a lot. Other countries too, if more disasters come." With five Pacific nations ranked in the top twenty globally for disaster risk (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft 2013), and forecasts of more frequent and severe disasters resulting from climate change, understanding the deeply religious contexts in which these play out will likely be even more important in time to come.

References

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Endnotes

¹ A note on terminology: For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'religion,' 'faith' and 'spiritual beliefs' have been used interchangeably, as have the terms 'humanitarian work,' 'humanitarian response' and 'disaster response.' It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the nuanced differences which exist in actuality between these terms, and it was noted that participants themselves often used the terms interchangeably as well.

² 'Melanesia' is a contested term, with some considering it an artificial Western construct remaining from colonial times (Kabutaulaka, 2015); however, more recently, its usage has been appropriated by inhabitants of the region in a positive and empowering way, and a sense of pan-Melanesian identity is being constructed (Kabutaulaka, 2015). Its usage here will refer to the sub-region of the Pacific of which Vanuatu is a part, which extends from West Papua in the west arguably as far as Fiji in the east (see Figure 1). While Melanesia is a vast, and by no means homogenous, region (Tomlinson & McDougall, 2013), there exist some commonalities in terms of culture and *kastom* which give the term some value for this research, notwithstanding its limitations.

³ International non-government organisations.