Christianity in Papua (successively called Papua land or Tanah Papua, Nieuw Guinee, Nederlands Nieuw Guinee, Irian Barat, Irian Jaya, West Irian Jaya/Papua and West Papua) represents the response of Papuans to the introduction of the Christian faith by missionaries, mainly from the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. To understand this response we must provide some introduction to the characteristics of Melanesian and Papuan culture and religion. The history of Christianity in Papua is quite different from that of most other parts of Indonesia. Until the last decades of the twentieth century there was hardly any active political role by Muslims. Missionary work started in the 1850s and has continued slowly since then. About the early 1960s Christianity was the dominant religion of the people and of the government. Papua still is the province with the highest percentage of Christians in the population.

Christian mission began in Papua in 1855, almost half a century before the Dutch colonial government entered the territory to establish its first permanent government posts there. Systematic external interference in Papuan indigenous political and social institutions came late and has been, until recently, quite limited. Traditional ways of life could be preserved, especially in the Highlands, where 40% of the Papuans live. Only in the early 1960s did the Indonesian Government and army begin to intervene intensively, often using considerable violence, in the culture, religion and economy of the Papuans. This was strongly resisted by the Papuans, who used Christian values and concepts in their struggle for freedom. Since the 1990s Papuans have used mainly non-violent methods, aiming at reconciliation and dialogue as means to solve their conflict with the Indonesians. The movement is nevertheless harshly suppressed by the Indonesian army and police. From 1970 until 1998 Papua was designated a Military Operational Territory (Daerah Operasi Militer, DOM). This means that the security forces exercise supremacy in society, in politics and in the economy.

Papua is the western part of the island of New Guinea. Its area is 420,000 sq. km, the size of California or one quarter the size of Indonesia without New Guinea. It had in 2004 about 2.5 million inhabitants of whom an estimated 1.6 million (about 65%) are Papuans. The remainder are ‘newcomers’ (pendatang), who came after the incorporation of Papua into Indonesia in the 1960s. There are three categories of these: a. the transmigrants, who have been settled in Papua by the government as peasant farmers, b. the ‘free’
migrants, who came as traders, taxi drivers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, salesmen and women at the market, miners and so on, and c. government officials and army and police personnel, who were sent there on a tour of duty. Some of them bought property and stayed after their retirement. Most of the migrants are from Java and by religion Muslim.

The Papuans are Melanesians who have probably lived there already some 30,000 to 40,000 years. The origin of the Melanesians is uncertain. They may once have occupied the whole of Indonesia. In Indonesia there are still a few pockets of people who are ethnically and linguistically similar to the Papuans, e.g. in Timor, the interior of Seram, Tanimbar and other islands in East Indonesia. The local myths of the Sentani people and the Me of Paniai tell that the Papuans came from the East. However, when arriving at the place where they settled they found people or remains of people who lived there before them. The enormous linguistic diversity of Papua is evidence of a long history of scattered settlements without much contact. Papuans speak more than 250 vastly differing languages. Some people on the North coast like the Biak and Numfor people speak Austronesian languages, which are members of the large language family to which also Malay, Malagasy and the Polynesian languages belong. Most Papuan languages are grouped together as “Papuan languages.” These language groups are small or very small with at times no more than 100 speakers. The largest language groups are: the Dani (229,000), the Me (also Kapauke or Ekari, 100,000), the Asmat (59,000), the Biak-Numfor (40,000), the Sentani (25,000) and Moni (Paniai, 20,000). Smaller groups include the Yali, the Marind-anim, the Amungme and the Ayfat.¹

The peoples on the North Coast and in Biak, the people from Numfor and Yapen (islands in the Cenderawasih Bay), as well those of the South coast of the Bird’s Head, live from cassava, fishing and hunting. The Highlands, unexplored until the 1940s and 1950s, is twice the size of Switzerland. The people of the Highlands practice a fairly sophisticated form of agriculture, with terracing and the making of stone fences. The Papuans were among the first cultivators in the world. Their main crop is the sweet potato (*batatas*), a crop originating from Middle America and brought to East Indonesia by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. The introduction of the sweet potato, replacing the yam (*keladi*), enabled the Papuans to settle in the Highlands, which are too cold for other crops. The sweet potato is here the main staple food for the humans and for the pigs. The pig has a very important role in society. It is used to pay a bride price, to compensate for damages and to

¹ Peter J. Silzer and Helja Heikkinen Clouse 1991. These figures may be dated. Moreover, in education and public life Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) is becoming dominant. Indonesian is used in church services, except for most churches in the highlands.