PART ONE

MELANESIA
Different varieties of both Christianity and Islam established themselves in parts of the Asia-Pacific region by interacting with indigenous cultures: examples would be the Islamisation of Indonesia and the Christianisation of Melanesia. Each tradition vigorously asserted an identity that was purportedly ‘universal’ in that it claimed to transcend localised or inherited ethnic and religious identities (Indonesia’s Hindu-Buddhist past and its indigenous cultures; Melanesia’s multiplicity of ethnicities and language groups) by participating in a global community and a uniform truth. Each ‘universal’ tradition faced a similar dilemma: elimination of or accommodation to these indigenous cultures? The danger envisaged in each case was that of syncretism.

The ways in which the missionary churches in the Pacific Islands and the Islamic movements of Indonesia dealt with this problem contain many lessons for their situations today, involving tolerance of and enrichment by local cultures; but the tensions inherent in each faith’s constitutive attitude to religious ‘otherness’ are now emerging in forms which are commonly branded ‘fundamentalist’. Both the attempt to create a new ‘Christendom’ (Philip Jenkins) and a ‘global ummah’ (Olivier Roy) offer the attraction of a kind of religious globalisation, with the assurance of adhering to a uniform orthodoxy in a worldwide community of believers; but they are also prone to intolerance, conflict and violence, which is particularly evident when their interests clash (various parts of Indonesia, West Papua, increasingly Papua New Guinea). The paper will investigate Islam’s and Christianity’s resources for relating constructively to indigenous cultures to the point where this could become a bridge of communication between Islam and Christianity themselves – their ‘ecumenist’ potential. In particular, it will focus on the potential of modernising and ‘liberationist’ tendencies in Indonesian Islam to deal with the ethical dilemmas raised by transmigrasi and the exploitation of West Papua’s land and people.

Introduction: Islam in Melanesia

In his masterly synthesis of a lifetime of research, Melanesian Religion, Garry Trompf took an innovative – not to say revolutionary – approach to the subject in that he devoted fully half his monograph to the advent of