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"When people have a vision they are very disobedient": a Solomon Islands case study for the anthropology of Christian ontologies

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**“When people have a vision they are very disobedient”: a Solomon Islands Case Study
for the Anthropology of Christian Ontologies**

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In order to clarify our thinking about Christianity and individualism, we need, I propose, an anthropology of Christian ontologies. By this I mean a sustained interrogation of how diverse Christians understand and experience—not so much what it means to be a Christian—but the very nature of Christian being. How, for example, do different Christians understand and experience the divine-human relation? Is this binary a radical dualism, an underlying identity of being, or something else—perhaps some form of participation without conflation? What is the body? What is the soul? What is spirit? How do different Christians understand and experience their ontological relationship to one another, both within and across the divisions of global Christianity? In what sense might the Fall and conversion be ontological transformations? Who or what are non-Christians and the non-Christian world, and what other categories of being—seen and unseen—do different Christians posit or claim to encounter?¹

The question this conference is addressing—“Individualization through Christian missionary activities?”—is, I would argue, fundamentally an ontological one. There is an implied question within it: “Is there a Christian model of the ontology of personhood that leads to individualization?” What I am proposing is that we cut straight to this underlying question and pluralize it: What model or *models* of the ontology of personhood do our field interlocutors assume or contest—either implicitly or explicitly? And what are the practical consequences of their engagement with these models?²

¹ Recent studies that intentionally interrogate Christian ontologies, their practical consequences, and/or the co-existence of Christian and non-Christian ontologies include, M. MAYBLIN, “The Madness of Mothers: Agape Love and the Maternal Myth in Northeast Brazil” (*American Anthropologist* 114, 2012, 240-252) and J.H.Z. REMME, “Manifesting Potentials: Animism and Pentecostalism in Ifugao, the Philippines” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oslo, 2012).

² Bielo has similarly called for “a comparative ethnography of Christian personhood.” His formulation of an agenda for this project is a welcome initiative. Crucially, however, the comparative ethnography of Christian models of personhood needs specifically to analyze these models in terms of ontology. Bielo’s identification of “the mind of Christ” as a born-again Christian model of personhood, for example, would yield greater insight into the relationship between this model and expectations of financial success if Bielo pursued indications in his primary consultant’s discourse that this is a participatory model, rooted in the same Pauline texts as the body of

My aim is to provide an ethnographically based indication of what the anthropology of Christian ontologies I am advocating for would look like. This involves two analytical components. First, I argue that anthropologists who theorize a *primary* logical trajectory within Christianity towards individualization already thereby posit a nexus between Christian ontology and practice. In so doing, however, they characterize Christian ontology in ways that tend to construct only one model of personhood—a model I will describe as atomistic—and they posit this model as definitive, either of Christianity as a whole or, more narrowly, of the particular kinds of Christianity they study. Second, based on my research in Solomon Islands, I analyze a conflict within the Anglican Church of Melanesia as evidence that is at odds with this monological view. This conflict provides access to the practical dynamics of a very different Christian model of personhood—a model I will describe as participatory. Recognition of this model serves, finally, to indicate future directions for the anthropological study of still other models and their historical interactions.

The Christian of anthropology

A positive feedback system among three anthropological practices has, I suggest, promoted a theoretical model of the Christian person as a virtually atomistic entity primarily oriented towards his or her “vertical” relationship to God.³ These three practices are: 1) an ethnographic preference for charismatic and radical Reformation-type Christianities such as Pentecostalism, Puritanism, and Pietism;⁴ 2) a focus on conversion to newly introduced

Christ ontology examined below. See, J.S. BIELO, “‘The Mind of Christ’: Financial Success, Born-Again Personhood, and the Anthropology of Christianity” (*Ethnos* 72, 2007, 315-338), 335.

³ Chua similarly questions anthropological models of a unidirectional Christian impetus towards individualization and, furthermore, identifies different relative emphases on “vertical” versus “horizontal” relations as characteristic of different Christianities. See, L. CHUA, *The Christianity of Culture: Conversion, Ethnic Citizenship, and the Matter of Religion in Malaysian Borneo* (New York 2012), 153-179.

⁴ Versions of the criticism that theory in the anthropology of Christianity has been too driven by studies of Pentecostal, Protestant, and indeed Western forms of Christianity is longstanding, e.g., C. HANN, “The Anthropology of Christianity *per se*” (*European Journal of Sociology* 48, 2007, 383-410); M.W. SCOTT, “‘I was like Abraham’: Notes on the Anthropology of Christianity from the Solomon Islands” (*Ethnos* 70, 2005, 101-125). Accordingly, recent publications recognize the need to make diverse Christianities “coeval” in the

Christainities, often to the neglect of existing Christianities in the field context;⁵ and 3) over-reliance on classic theoretical treatments of Christianity by figures such as Mauss, Weber, Foucault, and especially Dumont.

As evidence that the Christian of anthropological theory is a quasi-atomistic, vertically oriented being, I point to one recent influential publication—Fenella Cannell’s introduction to the edited volume, *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Cannell provides a useful but also revealing summary of key texts in the theorization of Christian personhood.⁶ She reviews how, according to Hegel, Durkheim, and Edmund Leach, Christianity posits a human person who is radically separate from God—even, it often appears, after redemption. In Cannell’s reading, this literature takes the human-divine separation to be Christianity’s key problematic; it therefore characterizes Christians as focused on overcoming this separation through forms of mediation and ascetic practice. Moving on to discussions of Mauss and Foucault, Cannell adds to this picture of the upward-looking Christian the image of the inward-looking Christian. She quotes Mauss’s claim that “[i]t is Christians who have made a metaphysical entity of the ‘moral person’” and links this to Foucault’s claim that Christianity has produced modern “Western man” as “a confessing animal” who fashions him or herself through reflexivity.⁷ Brief treatments of Weber and Dumont confirm and complete this image of the Christian person as very nearly an isolate, an otherworldly ascetic whose quest for signs of election has ironically created the capitalist individual. Cannell’s review of these

production of theory, see M. ENGELKE, “Past Pentecostalism: Notes on Rupture, Realignment, and Everyday Life in Pentecostal and African Independent Churches” (*Africa* 80, 2010, 177-199), 183.

⁵ But for indications of new directions see, CHUA, *Christianity of Culture*; A. ERIKSEN, “The Pastor and the Prophetess: An Analysis of Gender and Christianity in Vanuatu” (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, 2012, 103-122); T.S. KOLSHUS, “We, the Anglicans: An Ethnography of Empowering Conversions in a Melanesian Island Society” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oslo, 2007); M. MAYBLIN, *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality in Brazil: Virtuous Husbands, Powerful Wives* (New York 2010); J. RYLE, *My God, My Land: Interwoven Paths of Christianity and Tradition in Fiji* (Farnham, UK 2010).

⁶ F. CANNELL, “Introduction” in: F. CANNELL (Ed.), *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, NC 2006, 1-50), 14-22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

classics is not uncritical; it may be read, however, as re-inscribing this literature as anthropology's received wisdom about the Christian person.⁸

Writing primarily about Pentecostal and radical Reformation Christianities, anthropologists of Christianity have consistently appealed to this same body of literature in support of analyses according to which conversion to these Christianities has fostered individualism in their field contexts.⁹ In so doing, however, they have sometimes treated these authorities as though they were arguing that the modern autonomous self is intrinsic to Christianity per se rather than the outcome of processes to which Christianity has contributed. This is especially marked in some invocations of the work of Dumont. For example: in a recent iteration of the position that Christian personhood is “paradigmatic of that formation of personhood scholars recognize as individualism”, Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins return to Dumont's claim (based on Troeltsch) that Christianity makes the human person “an individual-in-relation-to-God.”¹⁰ They read Dumont as saying that Christianity, *from its inception and at its core*, models the Christian person as a virtually atomistic soul before God, created and saved in an almost purely vertical relationship. Accordingly, they collapse this quasi-atomistic Christian person into the modern secular individual Dumont described as an “independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being.”¹¹ But this is to treat the movement from the “something of modern individualism” that Dumont identified as present “with the first Christians” to modern individualism as a straight line or simple cause and effect relationship, glossing over the “transformation so radical and so

⁸ E.g., BIELO, ““Mind of Christ”” 334-335.

⁹ E.g., W. KEANE, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley 2007); C. KRAY, “Pentecostal Re-Formation of Self: Opting for Orthodoxy in Yucatán” (*Ethos* 29, 2001, 395-429); B. MEYER, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh 1999); J. ROBBINS, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley 2004).

¹⁰ J. BIALECKI, N. HAYNES, and J. ROBBINS, “The Anthropology of Christianity” (*Religion Compass* 2, 2008, 1139-1158), 1147. Bialecki et al. are referring to L. DUMONT, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago 1986), 27, 30. For the figure of the individual-in-relation-to-God, Dumont drew on the work of Ernst Troeltsch; see E. TROELTSCH, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York 1931).

¹¹ BIALECKI et al., “Anthropology of Christianity” 1147. Cf. ROBBINS, *Becoming Sinners*, 293.

complex that it took at least seventeen centuries of Christian history to be completed” that Dumont sought to explicate.¹²

Developing implicitly ontological analyses of their, and other anthropologists’ field data, Bialecki et al. posit a direct link between this quasi-atomistic Christian personhood and the emergence of individualism.¹³ They argue that because the Christian person is primarily an individual-in-relation-to-God, conversion to Christianity disembeds people from their existing horizontal social relations. This process, they say, frees Christians to engage with further individualizing institutions of modernity, especially capitalist markets. More recently, some anthropologists of Christianity have begun to analyze how Christians create new kinds of social relationships or realign existing ones.¹⁴ But such studies do not seek to problematize earlier claims within the subdiscipline that Christianity first makes the person an individual-before-God; rather, they examine how Christianity informs the ways in which, once individuated, the implicitly Maussian-Foucauldian moral self re-addresses the nature of relations.

I would not deny that there are Christians who think and act according to various versions of a quasi-atomistic, vertically oriented model of Christian personhood. I would argue, however, that such a model is not alone in the history of Christianity; others have always co-existed, either in combination or conflict with it. To develop this point, I examine here a controversy within the largely Anglican context I study.

A visionary healer in Arosi Anglicanism

¹² DUMONT, *Essays on Individualism*, 24.

¹³ See Appendix 1 below.

¹⁴ E.g., ENGELKE, “Past Pentecostalism”; N. HAYNES, “Pentecostalism and the Morality of Money: Prosperity, Inequality, and Religious Sociality on the Zambian Copperbelt” (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, 2012, 123-139).

Since 1992 I have been conducting fieldwork on the island of Makira in Solomon Islands. Most of my work has been among a linguistically-defined group of Melanesians known as the Arosi, whose home region is at the northwest end of the island.¹⁵

As background to the situation I will describe, I begin with a brief chronology of Christian missions in Arosi.¹⁶ First, in the 1850s, Arosi began to accept Christianity from the New Zealand-based Anglican Melanesian Mission—mainly along the northeast coast. Consequently, Anglicanism is dominant in this area and almost everyone now living there has been Christian from birth. Moreover, Anglican missionaries began ordaining indigenous clergy in the late 1800s and, since its inauguration in 1975 as a self-governing province within the global Anglican Communion, the Anglican Church of Melanesia has operated under Pacific Islander control. After the Anglicans, in the early 1900s the self-styled non-denominational South Sea Evangelical Mission took the south and west as its sphere of influence, laying the foundation for the present-day South Sea Evangelical Church. Lastly, in the 1930s indigenous missionaries from elsewhere in the Solomons brought Seventh-day Adventism to a small number of villages in both these older mission fields.

The internal Anglican controversy in Arosi on which I focus has been ongoing for several decades and remains unresolved. The conflict is between a lay healing ministry, led by Siton Suriha‘abwura, and diverse representatives of institutional Anglicanism, from the Archbishop of the Province down to local parish priests and concerned laity. Suri—as he is known locally—claims that, through a series of dream visions, he has received not only spiritual gifts for healing but also a commission from Christ authorizing him to pray over

¹⁵ Funding for this research has been provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the London School of Economics, and the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No: RES-000-23-1170).

¹⁶ For more detailed discussions of mission history in Arosi, see S. SAYES, “The Ethnohistory of Arosi, San Cristobal” (M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1976); M.W. SCOTT, “‘Heaven on Earth’ or Satan’s ‘Base’ in the Pacific?: Internal Christian Politics in the Dialogic Construction of the Makiran Underground Army” in: M. TOMLINSON and D. MCDUGALL (Eds.), *Christian Politics in Oceania* (Oxford 2013, 49-77), 56-58, 62; M.W. SCOTT, *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands* (Durham, NC 2007), 95-100, 268-282.

water and forgive sins. Those within the church who have opposed him have done so on very specific grounds. While they are willing to recognize Suri's spiritual gifts for healing, they insist that he must refrain from appearing to bless water and presuming to forgive sin. This is because, in the Anglican Church of Melanesia, only bishops and priests—ordained clergy—are empowered to perform these works of the Spirit.

I first interviewed Suri in 1993 when he was in his 30s and living in his home village of 'Ubuna. At that time, he gave me a well-polished and widely known account of how his healing ministry is rooted in a series of four dream visions. These dreams, he said, had come to him over the course of four years during his adolescence, probably in the 1960s. These dreams are too complex to relate here in detail, but they are rich in biblical images and allusions. For present purposes, the main thing to note is that, according to Suri, these dreams showed him how to pray over water and how to use the water to anoint the sick.

It was not until the mid 1970s, however, that Suri performed his first healing, drawing on his dreams. This occurred because his wife's brother became ill when there was no clinic nearby, and the local priest was unavailable. In Suri's words: "I remembered the dreams and thought, it must be from the Holy Spirit or I'd have forgotten it, so I'll do it." Aware that people might object if he were seen to be blessing water, he used a leaf to conceal the act of praying over the water. This first effort, he told me, was a success; his brother-in-law recovered, and news of Suri's healing gift began to spread.

After this, Suri encountered friction from practitioners of an established Anglican healing ministry from the neighbouring island of Guadalcanal. I quote from his account:

A healing ministry came from Guadalcanal into which lots of people from 'Ubuna joined. Once, they had prayed for a person and they weren't better, so I went and prayed and they got better. People started to say I was better than them, so a little split

developed between us. They told the priest: “That person blesses water like a priest.” So the Father asked me, “Why are you blessing water and doing things that the bishop does? Those are things that our church has forbidden.” And I told him my story. He said, “Yes. If someone despises what this person is doing and tries to stop him, they aren’t working for the church.”

Following this confrontation, Suri experienced three additional dreams in which Jesus commissioned him to forgive sins. In Suri’s words, each of these dreams constituted a “consecration” (*dau bohi*). In the first dream, Jesus consecrated Suri by word, simply asserting: “I consecrate you to put aside sin.” In the second, Jesus breathed on Suri. In the third, he poured a container of oil over Suri’s head. This imagery implies that Suri received an apostolic commission and priestly ordination directly from Jesus.¹⁷

Gradually, Suri attracted several followers to whom he taught the prayers and procedures he had received in his dreams. He was also made a deacon in the Anglican churches throughout his district, helping the priests distribute the wine at Holy Communion. But then “people started to say that I was blessing the bread,” he told me. Because of these and other accusations, Suri and his practices have sporadically attracted the concern of the Anglican hierarchy in Solomon Islands since the early 1980s. Although wanting to hold what they see as the healing ministry’s true gifts within the fold of the church, the clergy have repeatedly insisted that Suri and his followers must let a priest bless the water they use in their healing. Suri, for his part, has consistently refused to give up praying over water in the manner he says was given to him by the Spirit. In 1991 the Diocese of Hanuato‘o, which includes the island of Makira, was created, and the first two bishops, James Mason (1991-2004) and Jonnie Kuper (2005-2007), both met with Suri in efforts to reconcile him to the

¹⁷ In John 20:21-23, when the risen Jesus commissions the original disciplines, he breathes on them to impart the Holy Spirit and authorizes them to forgive sins.

church's terms. But, as Bishop Kuper remarked when I asked him about this situation in 2006, "When people have a vision, they are very disobedient." Owing to Suri's lack of adequate secondary education, training him for the priesthood has not been taken up as an option for resolving this problem. In 1993, Suri confided to me: "Now in my dreams, it looks like we'll have our own village so as to follow our own teachings." This is what has happened. So far, no official schism has occurred and, as of 2006, the position of Suri's ministry remained ambiguous.

Excursus on Montanism

In an earlier article I observed that "the logical trajectories of Christianity can lead Christians in different times and places to formally related conceptual and practical outcomes that lend themselves to instructive comparisons."¹⁸ Furthering this comparative agenda, I suggest that, in many ways, this standoff within Arosi Anglicanism reprises what has become known as the Montanist controversy—a dispute in the ancient church that remained unresolved for four centuries.

The Montanist movement is so called after its founder, Montanus, a convert to Christianity in mid second-century Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Montanism outlived its founder, however, and spread within the church from Asia Minor to North Africa, Italy, and Gaul before it was suppressed in the mid sixth century. Although tolerated for a long time, the movement drew heavy criticism from many church leaders because Montanus, among others, had claimed to receive new revelations from the Holy Spirit while in states of ecstatic trance. For this reason also, adherents of the movement termed it "the New Prophecy." Current scholarship has concluded that, although the New Prophecy may have introduced more rigorous moral and ascetic standards than were normative in the church at large, its

¹⁸ SCOTT, "I was like Abraham" 118; cf., M.M. BAKHTIN, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. V.W. McGee (Austin 1986), 124.

teachings were consistent with what was emerging as accepted doctrine.¹⁹ (This is also true of Suri; like the Montanists Suri and his followers could be viewed as “rigorists.”) The chief threat the movement posed, therefore, was not the spirit of its revelations but its emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit to reveal itself to anyone, anywhere—not exclusively through the forms and offices of the church. Oxford church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch assesses the nature of the conflict in comparative terms that, I suggest, spell out why many anthropologists of Christianity might find study of the Montanist controversy relevant to their work. “The problem,” he writes:

was one of authority.... The Church was settling on one model of authority in monarchical episcopacy and the threefold ministry [of bishop, priest, and deacon]; the Montanists placed against that the random gift of prophecy. The two models have a long history of conflict in the subsequent Christian centuries: the significance of the Montanist episode is that this is the first time the clash appears. Later it would be seen in the first Protestant rebels against Rome, in the radicals beyond the Protestants, in Methodists and Millerites, in Pentecostals and African-initiated Churches.²⁰

MacCulloch is not alone in pointing to the Montanist episode as having precipitated a recurrent core conflict within Christianity—one that has furthermore produced the kinds of Christianities anthropologists have tended to study. Cecil Robeck, Professor of Church History and Ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary, has similarly observed that “Montanism can be viewed as an instructive prototype of the modern Pentecostal and

¹⁹ W. TABBERNEE, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism* (Leiden 2007).

²⁰ D. MACCULLOCH, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London 2009), 139-140.

Charismatic movements complete with their prophetic claims, words, challenges, actions, discernment, and *backlash*.”²¹

Recasting MacCulloch’s assessment slightly, I would argue that the Montanist episode was a clash between two sites of authority both recognized within one model of the church. But I would further argue that the issue was one of ontology. I want, in other words, to analyze Christian authority in terms of Christian ontology. Do different configurations of Christian power relations express, index, and even transformatively impinge on different configurations of Christian being?

The body of Christ as participatory ontology

It would be possible to analyze Suri as living out the practical consequences of atomistic Christian personhood. Because he is—first and foremost—an individual-in-relation-to-God, according to such an analysis, he is following his sense of direct calling by the Holy Spirit and is separating himself from other persons and institutions whose spiritual authority he is calling into doubt as blocking rather than mediating his relationship to God.

I would like to suggest a different analysis, however—one that can account not only for Suri’s actions but also for the *reactions* of his fellow Christians who presume to evaluate and even mediate his experience of God. I submit that all parties to this controversy are operating with a common understanding of Christian personhood that is fundamentally participatory. This model entails several possible variations on the nature and degree of ontological participation, both among Christians and between Christians and God. It is these variations that support—not two different models of—but two co-existing loci of spiritual authority.

²¹ C. ROBECK, “Montanism and Present Day ‘Prophets’” (*Pneuma* 3, 2010, 413-429), 417, emphasis added.

Before elaborating this participatory model of Christian personhood, however, I should stress that I am not ruling out the possibility—even the likelihood—that the controversy I am describing is also informed by other models of Christian personhood. A range of assumptions about Christian persons as comprising one (or more) personal essence or soul—material or immaterial; generated with and dependent on the body or pre-existent to and able to outlive it—could be found among Arosi.²² Ideally, the anthropology of Christian ontologies I am proposing would seek to interrogate these assumptions and discern how Arosi do or do not integrate them with the participatory model I examine here. In what follows, however, I concentrate on the latter as most salient and general in Arosi debates about Suri’s ministry.

The participatory model of Christian personhood relevant here finds its fullest expression in the ancient understanding of the church as the body of Christ. In the controversy surrounding Suri, the clearest indication that people’s actions are informed by this understanding is their engagement with yet another Christian teaching with which it intersects, namely the doctrine of apostolic succession.²³

Whether in technical or lay terms, everyone involved understands that the controversy hinges on the Anglican Church of Melanesia’s interpretation and observance of apostolic succession.²⁴ Matthias Taro, a long-serving Arosi priest, identified this doctrine by name when I asked him in 2006 why people were so concerned that Suri might be blessing water.

²² On the lack of consensus on these issues among Arosi, see SCOTT, *Severed Snake*, 173-174. A few anthropologists have begun to recognise the diversity of ideas about “the soul” in various forms of Christianity, e.g., F. CANNELL, “The Christianity of Anthropology” (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, 2005, 335-356), 342-344. Others, problematically, assume that there is only one Christian understanding of soul or spirit (often described as immortal and/or opposed to the body).

²³ On the ancient history of this doctrine, see H. BETTENSON and C. MAUNDER (Eds.), *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford 1999), 74-81.

²⁴ On the doctrine of apostolic succession in the Melanesian Mission and the Anglican Church of Melanesia, see D. HILLIARD, *God’s Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849-1942* (St Lucia, Queensland 1978), 2, 234; KOLSHUS, “We, the Anglicans,” 149, 256-257; D. WHITEMAN, *Melanesians and Missionaries: an Ethnohistorical Study of Social and Religious Change in the southwest Pacific* (Pasadena, CA 1983), 333-336.

Speaking at that time as the Vicar-General of the diocese that includes Makira, Fr Taro answered:

Holy water is water that has been blessed.... They have consecrated us [clergy] and we hold the authority to do that work. A belief in the Anglican church is “apostolic succession” [Fr Taro used the English expression]. The ministry of bishops and priests is handed down from the apostles. From Jesus to the apostles, like Peter, to the people after them, it is still the same faith and isn’t a different faith. Those are the ordained people, like the apostles who were authorized by Jesus.... That’s ordination where they say, “I send you out into the world to preach, to teach, and to heal.” ... But Suri’s authority doesn’t come from the Bishop.... He says that God gave him this thing.... He just follows his own thoughts.

Martin Lui, an Arosi layman who has worked for the Anglican Church of Melanesia as Regional Secretary and Plantation Manager, gave a similar explanation of the situation, noting that he had been a member of Suri’s healing ministry in the early 1980s.

In the church only priests and bishops can bless holy oil and water, but [Suri] says the prayers for water.... If the priest blessed the water and oil for the healing ministry there wouldn’t be any confusion in the church, there wouldn’t be a split between the priests and Suri.... The church follows the doctrine that started in and comes down from Pentecost and comes down on the apostles, and the apostles ordained James as the first bishop in the church. The ministry of the apostles comes and comes until it reaches the priests and the bishops and keeps going in every church. But Suri separated out on his own from them. He blesses water himself. He blesses oil himself.

Even Arosi less schooled in formal doctrine pointed to ways in which Suri's activities might be viewed as overreaching the authority of a layperson. For example, in a conversation initially unrelated to Suri's situation, my long-term research collaborator, Casper Kaukeni, observed:

We [Anglicans] have "access to eternal life" [phrase in English] through the power (*mena*) that is passed down ... it comes from Jesus Christ's laying on of hands from Jesus to the apostles, to the popes, to the bishops, to the priests, and to the *tasiu* [the Melanesian Brotherhood].... That's why Bishop Jonnie [Kuper] is against Suri, so that they won't go out from the power of Jesus. It's the healing hand of Jesus.²⁵

Supporters and detractors of Suri's ministry, young and old alike, knew that the controversy turned on such issues as the idea that "not just anyone can bless water" or that "only a priest can bless people to join a healing ministry."

To spell out the political implications of apostolic succession, it may be said that this doctrine implies a model of the church that is holistic in the Dumontian sense. The doctrine yields a series of hierarchical oppositions that may be expressed as follows: Christ is to the apostles; as the apostles are to bishops; as bishops are to priests; as priests are to laity.²⁶ This, in fact, is the doctrine to which MacCulloch alludes when he describes the ancient church as "settling on one model of authority in monarchical episcopacy" at the time of Montanism.

²⁵ Kaukeni's remarks emerged in the context of a conversation about Seventh-day Adventism and constitute his representation of what Anglicanism has that Adventism lacks. This suggests that his and other lay Anglicans' grasp of apostolic succession may be inflected by an element of denominational polemic within local Anglican catechism. Cf. SCOTT, "Heaven on Earth."

²⁶ That said, Melanesians have interpreted Anglican hierarchical holism differently in different contexts. The outcomes in Arosi have, for example, been significantly different from those analyzed by Kolshus (KOLSHUS, "We, the Anglicans") on Mota in the Banks Islands, Vanuatu. As Kolshus insightfully shows, indigenous graded societies, secret associations, and distinctive understandings of the transmission of *mana* inform Motese interpretations of church structure, apostolic succession, and priestly power.

The doctrine of apostolic succession has several biblical precedents. Among these are the gospel narratives about how Jesus called and commissioned the original twelve apostles—narratives to which Suri’s dream visions allude in detail. But it also depends on the image of the church as the body of Christ, which first appears in the canonical epistles attributed to Paul.²⁷ Arosi in general are thoroughly familiar with this image. It figures in the catechism as well as in the liturgies for baptism and Holy Communion, and has become part of common Arosi Anglican and even inter-denominational discourse. After a Sunday service I attended in 1993, for example, a lay catechist sought to motivate parishioners to serve in capacities such as reader and acolyte by reminding them: “We’re all part of the body of Christ (*aba ni abena Kraest*). You’re a leg, you’re a finger, a head, like different parts of a house. So we all have to take part.” Both in its ancient origin and in Arosi today, this image of the church can be more than simply a metaphor or a political order; it can index a participatory ontology. But, from its earliest biblical formulations, this participatory ontology has been in tension with itself. Let me explain the nature of this internal tension.

According to Paul, all Christians have—by the power of the Holy Spirit—been baptized into the body of Christ and are therefore *all one* in Christ.²⁸ All, in some way, inhere ontologically in Christ *and* in one another; no Christian, therefore, is without some direct continuity of being with Christ.²⁹ As affirmed by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century: “through participation in the same Christ we all become one body, possessing the one Lord in ourselves.”³⁰ At the same time, however, Paul asserts that—also by the power

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:3, 12:12-31; Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 1:18, 2:19.

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:13; cf. Galatians 3:27-28.

²⁹ Cf. MACCULLOCH, *History of Christianity*, 101-102.

³⁰ Quoted in J.N.D. KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London 2006), 404. Athanasius represents that strand within Christianity that views redemption as a process of divinization through which Christians become incorporated into the fellowship of the Trinity. Whereas some Christians would reject this model as entailing the abrogation of the creator-creation distinction, versions of this model of divinizing participation have always been available to Christians and remain at the forefront of Anglican and other theologies, e.g., R. SHORTT, *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London 2005), 12, 81, 95.

of the Holy Spirit—Christians are differentiated into hierarchically ordered *members*, and he makes it plain that the first among these are apostles.

Here, accordingly, is where the ontology of the body of Christ informs the doctrine of apostolic succession. The Pauline image of the body of Christ converges with the hierarchical holism of apostolic succession through an additional and re-enforcing series of oppositions: Christ is to the church; as head is to body; as apostles—which is to say, bishops and priests—are to laity; as male is to female.

To recap: in conversion, the Holy Spirit calls people out of participation in sin, thus individuating them to some degree. But it does so in order to bring them into new relations that are not merely social but ontologically transformative, new relations of participation in the very being (body) of Christ.³¹ Then, in much the same way, the Holy Spirit further calls some members of the body of Christ to serve as clergy—thus individuating them to a further degree—but it does so in order, paradoxically, to transform them into higher members in whom all lower members participate.

This is to say that higher members—especially in their ritual capacities—index and enact the whole body of Christ vis-à-vis the lower members, the laity. Bishops and priests stand in place of Christ, uniquely participating in both head and body and encompassing the plurality of all members in one.³² This enables them to serve as special mediators between Christ, the head, and his lower members. Clergy become individuated, in other words, in order also to become multiple—in order to become almost stand-alone instantiations of the whole, as symbolized by their robes, the cope and the chasuble. In keeping with the Anglican Church of Melanesia’s Anglo-Catholic heritage, Anglican clergy in Solomon Islands wear

³¹ Cf. CHUA, *Christianity of Culture*, 154, 165-168.

³² Many factors throughout the history of Christianity have led some Christians to understand the body of Christ simply as a metaphor for Christian community rather than a participatory ontology. This is because the latter view implies not only participation in divinity but can also be said to imply that clergy enjoy a fuller degree of participation in divinity than laity. Nevertheless, participatory understandings of the model continue to inform controversies, such as the one involving Suri, and especially those surrounding the capacity of women to serve as clergy in the Anglican Church of Melanesia and elsewhere.

these robes with great ceremony.³³ This may even have something to do with why, at one point, the clergy ordered the healing ministry to stop wearing their specially designed red and white robes. As of 2006, however, Suri and his followers were still wearing them undeterred.

Like many Christians who maintain various forms of hierarchical holism in their churches, Arosi Anglicans thus live with a kind of mixed message about the ontological underpinnings of power and authority among the faithful. In Pauline terms, they are all one in the Holy Spirit, yet differentiated by hierarchically ordered spiritual gifts.³⁴ Frank Rau, who serves as a reader in his village church, explained these two aspects of Christian being to me in his own terms. He said that, “when you are baptized you’ve got the Holy Spirit,” but “if you do not have a special discipline (*duruduru*) then you don’t have power (*mena*), you only hold the Holy Spirit.” Those with special disciplines include clergy but also catechists, readers, healers, and members of Anglican orders, such as the Melanesian Brotherhood, the Sisters of Melanesia, and the Society of St Francis. These disciplines in the church form a “ladder” (*buuhane*), according to Rau, and each entails its own proper *mena*.

At the same time, however, Arosi Anglicans readily articulate and accept the principle that, in extremis, *any baptized Christian* has the power and authority to baptize a dying or dead infant in the absence of a priest. Simply by virtue of his or her own baptism, every Christian has the capacity to act as a priest, to stand in the place of Christ as a part that encompasses the whole. “The bishop and priest tell us that we each can baptize our child if he or she dies,” an ordinary lay person, Ben Aharo, told me. “We can make the sign of the cross on the child,” he added and concluded, “This shows that we have *mena*.”

Such a recognition of ordinary lay power has the potential to challenge the need for a “ladder” of additional powers and can even undermine the importance of participation in

³³ On the Anglo-Catholic heritage in the Church of Melanesia, see T.M. BROWN, ms. “The ‘Anglican Way’ and History”; KOLSHUS, “We, the Anglicans,” 148-151; S.H. SOHMER, “Christianity without Civilization: Anglican Sources for an Alternative Nineteenth-Century Mission Methodology” (*Journal of Religious History* 18, 1994, 174-197). Cf. HILLIARD, *God’s Gentlemen*, 2, 9, 14, 232-236.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:4.

horizontal as well as vertical relations within the body of Christ. It has the potential, in other words, to promote Christian atomism. But the historic challenge for many Christians, including Arosi Anglicans, has been to avoid this outcome and hold the two sites of Christian power and authority in balance.

Conclusion

Suri does not reject the hierarchical version of Christian participatory ontology. Rather, he rejects what he takes to be its dysfunction in the persons of particular clergy, namely those who refuse to recognize his dream commission and ordination. He takes their negative judgement of his para-ordination as a sign that they are not mediating the Spirit properly and places greater trust in his own direct experience of the Spirit. According to Suri, at one point when the clergy ordered him to stop his healing work, he prayed to Jesus saying, “I don’t understand why your people who work in your church are doing this to me. And even though they have done this to me and this work, I won’t put it aside because you are the Spirit.”

Suri is not operating with or innovating a different model of Christian personhood than the one the clergy assume; rather, he is relying on an existing potential within a shared participatory model of the body of Christ. He is relying on every Christian’s claim to a measure of direct continuity of being with Christ. But this aspect of the model is not necessarily pushing him towards atomism; instead, it enables him to set himself up as an encompassing priest-like figure among his followers.³⁵ He and his followers have organized what they call a “school” in which newcomers learn prayers and disciplines likened by some to those of the clergy and conventionally sanctioned lay orders. Students preparing to join the healing ministry enter the school move through several hierarchically ordered stages of instruction. According to Billy Raruimae, a former pupil, newcomers enter as what is

³⁵ See Appendix 2 below.

described in English as an “aspirant” and leave as a *mama* (father; this is the Arosi word used to designate a priest) who has “gone into the gift” of healing. A visit to the healing ministry’s headquarters above ‘Ubuna today creates a powerful first impression of an elaborate mimesis of Anglican forms and practices. But, if mimesis is the replication of forms and practices in order to acquire their intrinsic power, there appears to be an inversion here.³⁶ It is because the healing ministry believes it already works in the power (*mena*) of the Holy Spirit that it is replicating Anglican forms and practices.³⁷

This case study, to conclude, presents two semi-individuated kinds of Christians enacting two dialogically related aspects of a single participatory ontology. By virtue of his participation in the body of Christ, Suri—an ordinary lay person—claims a visionary calling that simultaneously individuates him and increases the degree of his participation in that body. In response, highly individuated and highly participatory clergy seek to counter him with seemingly authoritarian anti-individualism. This, I submit, is a very different Christian model of ontology than the atomistic model theorized in most of the anthropology of Christianity. What, then, are the sources of various versions of that atomistic model? Has the participatory model here identified somehow—through processes of historical transformation—produced the atomistic model in certain forms of Christianity? Or have different models of Christian ontology been historically heterogeneous, cooperative, and even contradictory? To explore these and other related questions is to further develop the anthropology of Christian ontologies.

APPENDIX 1: Mark Mosko on Dumont and the Christian Dividual

³⁶ On mimesis, see M. TAUSSIG, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London 1993).

³⁷ A similar logic informed Martin Luther’s reconstitution of the forms and practices of the ancient church apart from the transmission of apostolic succession. See A.E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford 1999), 195-208.

Mark Mosko has offered an interpretation of Dumont's influential essay on the Christian origins of modern individualism that may be read, I suggest, as evidence of just how difficult it is to determine what the Christian model(s) of personhood may be in any historical or cultural context.³⁸ Mosko appears to argue that, according to Dumont, the pre-Reformation Christian person was, like the ancient Hindu renouncer, an unqualified dividual seeking detachment from in-worldly relations in order to elicit out-worldly relationship to God. Only Dumont's post-Reformation Christian, Mosko seems to assert, entails an "inner immortal soul" that is indivisible.³⁹ Yet, even with this inner immortal soul, the Christian person remains, Mosko proposes, a fundamentally composite partible person, able to detach aspects of itself—the mortal body, good works, faith, etc.—and receive aspects of various divine personages. By this analysis, the Christian person is, in fact, very like the composite partible person of the New Melanesian Ethnography, a similarity Mosko speculates may have contributed to the missionary success of Christianity in Melanesia.⁴⁰

Questions could be raised about this reading of Dumont and/or about this characterization of an indivisible immortal soul as part of a Christian dividual. What is nonetheless noteworthy is that Mosko appears to deny that an arguably atomistic (indivisible) model of (an element of) Christian personhood—the unique immortal soul—necessarily correlates with processes of individualization. If, as I would argue, Bialecki et al. read Dumont's appeal to the notion of the Christian as an individual-in-relation-to-God as implying this same atomistic model of a unique immortal soul, then Bialecki et al. and Mosko appear, instructively, to identify inverse modes of sociality (individualization versus ongoing

³⁸ M. MOSKO, "Partible Penitents: Dividual Personhood and Christian Practice in Melanesia and the West" (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, 2010, 215-240). Mosko's essay also engages with K. BURRIDGE, *Someone, No One: Essays on Individuality* (Princeton 1979).

³⁹ MOSKO, "Partible Penitents" 220, but see DUMONT, *Essays on Individualism*, 30.

⁴⁰ Arguably, however, this model of an indivisible core essence at the centre of processes of detachment and attachment is in tension with Strathern's influential model of Melanesian sociality. See, for example, M. STRATHERN, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley 1988), esp. 269; cf. S. HESS, "Strathern's Melanesian 'dividual' and the Christian 'individual': A Perspective from Vanua Lava, Vanuatu" (*Oceania* 76, 2006, 285-296), 288.

composite personhood) as possible practical outcomes from a single atomistic model of the ontology of the Christian person.⁴¹

APPENDIX 2: Annelin Eriksen on Pastor and Prophetess in Vanuatu

Taken together, the present study and a recent article by Annelin Eriksen point, I suggest, to the impossibility of identifying either of the two loci of Christian spiritual authority—hierarchically encompassing leaders or their congregants—as the stable site of either individuating or collectivizing dynamics.⁴² Given its focus on an Anglican context, the present study emphasizes the role of the clergy as representatives of a corporate entity—the church and its apostolic traditions—over against one congregant singled out as waywardly individualistic. Given its focus on new charismatic churches emerging in the context of an older Presbyterianism in Vanuatu, Eriksen’s study analyzes processes that both confirm and invert this leaders/collective versus congregants/individual dichotomy. On the one hand, Eriksen argues, Presbyterian egalitarianism allows particular (usually male) persons to emerge as visionary leaders who, on the authority of direct personal callings and commissions from the Holy Spirit, found new charismatic movements. Ironically, although coming to the fore within this arguably individualistic spiritual paradigm and founding independent churches without multi-tiered ordained clergy, these charismatic leaders become “representations of social relations,” singular collectivities—much like Anglican bishops and priests.⁴³ On the other hand, however, these charismatic “big men,” once elevated, face challenges to their authority in ways that reveal their simultaneously quasi-individual and highly composite natures. Vis-à-vis junior pastors in their congregations who, based on their own encounters with the Holy Spirit, schismatically start churches of their own, these senior leaders appear collective, representing their congregations over against these upstart spiritual

⁴¹ See BIALECKI et al., “Anthropology of Christianity.”

⁴² See ERIKSEN, “Pastor and Prophetess.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 111.

individualists. At the same time, however, vis-à-vis the “collective spiritual experiences” of prophetesses in their congregations, these same senior leaders can themselves appear—and come under critique—as quasi-individuals who are claiming too much control over the Spirit.⁴⁴

Informed by the gendered nature of individuating and hierarchical versus collective and egalitarian practices on the island of Ambrym (Vanuatu), Eriksen insightfully analyzes this latter pastor-versus-prophetesses relationship as constituting a gendered tension between masculinized leaders and their feminized congregations in the urban charismatic movements she studies. This gender analysis resonates, not only with biblical models of the church as the body and bride of Christ, but also—as Eriksen points out—with the relative valuation of gendered bodies in different historical Christianities.⁴⁵ Yet Eriksen’s analysis also shows that there are no fixed leader/individual and congregant/collective correlations. A leader is also a collective, and a congregant may individuate from the collective to become a new leader. This, I suggest, is because, in a participatory ontology all persons are, in shifting relative proportions, simultaneously singular and plural (masculine and feminine); they are both partially detached representations of the relations they encompass and further encompassed within other relations.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.