I am attending this Colloquium, not as someone knowledgeable about indigenous religion in the Pacific region, but as a political philosopher interested both in how human beings can best put together the communal arrangements that help them to live well, and in the relationship between religion and politics. I am, therefore, very interested in what is being presented here, and would like to pay my respects, particularly to those who have written keynote addresses, but also to those who are attempting to tap into the resources of indigenous religion in order to work towards better governance and peace. Let me begin with two experiences of my own.

The Spirituality of Uluru and the Marae of Taputapuatea

The first experience of indigenous spirituality was when in 1999, I visited Uluru, for a time known as Ayers Rock, in the Uluru-Katatjuta National Park in Central Australia. I had been there in my youth years before and had climbed to the top, 400 metres above the desert sand. On my second visit, I listened to the traditional owners, the Anangu, and out of respect refrained from climbing 'the rock'. Instead I spent a day walking around its nine-kilometre base. There was a waterhole that allowed vibrant life in the midst of the desert. I also came across a cave used for secret rituals for thousands of years. This was seen from outside; it could not be entered. This visit was a deeply spiritual experience for me.

The second experience was earlier this year (2005). I was similarly moved, when I visited the marae of Taputapuatea on the island of Raiatea in French Polynesia. This ancient shrine stands on the shore of the lagoon facing the sacred ocean pass of Te Ava Moa. It was here that Polynesian seafarers said their prayers and offered their sacrifices to the god creator before setting out on their long voyages around the Pacific. Thanks were offered when they returned. Here I recognised the sacredness of the site and sensed the respect of my guide, who had been born in the area, for the place. Like Uluru it was remarkable both for its [197] natural disposition and for the history of human religious activity that remains part of the place to this day.

Let me now talk briefly about the work that I have been doing during the past year.

Alternatives to the Modern European State – Good Governance

In contemporary political and academic discourse in Australia and other parts of the world, one often hears the terms ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ states. Leaders of Pacific nations are often annoyed but also caught when these terms are applied to their own countries. On the one hand, Pacific states are not the great economic machines that are part of the modern world, and, indeed, they often find it difficult to sustain all of the usual institutions of a state. On the other hand, they can generally point out that in their countries, for the most part, people do not go hungry, as they might, say, in Sydney or Washington or New York. However, the annoyance is justified because the criticism masks the assumption that Pacific states are or should be instances of the modern European state.

The political form known as the modern European state is a product of a particular history and of human invention that came together in Europe during the seventeenth century. It has become the dominant political form in the world, and is attractive particularly for the impetus it gives to economic activity, both in providing incentive to those who would engage in industry and in offering protection to enterprises that are dependent on large amounts of capital. It has also brought a kind of peace within states based on strong government, control of the instruments of force and allowance of expression of ideas. Contrarily, it has allowed or even fostered dreadful wars between states such as those we saw during the twentieth century. It is, however, based on illusions such as the claims that there are only individuals (and not families or clans); that life will be good if the means are provided whereby all individuals are able to satisfy whatever desires move them; that radical
democracy is the best form of government; that politics can be without ethics.

Some of these ideas are inimical to life as it is found in the Pacific and elsewhere. My work has been to investigate how the political thought of Aristotle, found in his work The Politics, might provide a more adequate way of finding the best way to live. Aristotle did not lay down a particular political form as necessary, but rather saw that political communities grow out of natural communities and that they are formed with particular senses of the good or good life. His thought surveys a range of formal possibilities – monarchy, aristocracy, republicanism, democracy, oligarchy and tyranny – and shows how these forms might be blended in particular instances. He articulates four senses of what is best – the best possible, the best practicable, the best for particular circumstances, the best that can be achieved by a particular people. What a particular people can achieve is moderated by geography, history, culture, economic possibility and the availability of people able to judge wisely.

[198] My thesis is that Pacific states may find political forms more suited to their situations and preferred kinds of life by means of this kind of analysis than by unreflective adoption of the idea of the modern state.

Let me now turn to the relationship between religion and politics, or between church and state, or between religious authority and political authority. It is here that peace may be sought, but it is also here that conflict is often generated.

**Relationships between Religion and Politics – Peace**

Each of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – finds itself in a situation in which there is essential conflict between religious authority and political authority. On the one hand, all religious people are members of political communities, and political communities have their own forms of authority and those regarded as superior. On the other hand, belief in a Creator God, who need not have created but who chose to do so, suggests a source of understanding of things intimate to the world, given in revelation and mediated by a religious authority that cannot subjugate itself to mere human authority.

Christendom, which pertained between 600 and 1600, can be regarded as a great political experiment, in which political authority became subservient to religious authority. Ultimately the political experiment failed, because, among other reasons, religious authority was sullied when pushed to political compromise and to expedient use of force. As well, Christianity itself broke into parts during the Reformation, some of these parts resorting to violence against each other. The modern world looked to a new solution to the difficulty. In a secular liberal democracy, the state, while allowing the practice of religion as a personal freedom, insists that the churches not be part of the political community as such and that the state define itself as non-religious. This certainly settled the religious wars, but it generated states in which the sense of the sacred has become more and more remote.

Again, for Aristotle, this was not an issue. Religion was very much part of the structure of life and could neither be excluded from the political community nor become dominant. The sacred was respected and the priests, chosen not from among the young (the warriors) nor from among the middle aged (the statesmen) but from among the old (the wise and reflective), had authority that pertained to the matters of the gods. They were spared the parry and thrust of the daily business of the city.

It is my hope that the study and thought flowing from this colloquium will help us to tap into ideas flowing from traditional or indigenous religion that will enable the peoples whose cultures and history are heir to those ideas, to find fresh impetus and means to live peacefully with one another and to pursue the kind of life that might be called best. The compromises of the West are not the only, nor even the best solutions to the problem of how to best live together. In time, I am sure that peoples of the Pacific can draw on the resources of their cultures and histories in search of peace and good governance and that the West can learn from them.

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**Notes**

