We well know that there are many approaches in contemporary theology and almost all of them have some legitimacy and fruitfulness. Mudd’s work is an effort to elucidate some of these approaches for the benefit of his readers and those whom they will influence.

Andrew Murray

*Thinking about Political Things: An Aristotelian Approach to Pacific Life* (Marist series, Vol. 6)
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The post-colonial landmarks in the Pacific region on matters concerning good governance, self-autonomy, improving standard of living, preservation of culture and identity, constitutional changes, political reforms and the provision of basic social services to remote outposts are ongoing academic discussions. In this clearly defined book Andrew Murray adds a philosophical dimension to this growing ‘literature of crisis’. In clear and concise English, the author has skilfully made Aristotle’s political philosophy simple, attractive and engaging. After summarizing Aristotle’s text on *Politics*, Murray then appropriates Aristotle’s teaching with great care to the geographically vast, historically ancient and hugely heterogeneous nations of the Pacific region. To those who are unfamiliar with the region, Murray has provided maps, along with illustrative graphs and data references, thus adding useful information to make his book equally suitable for use as a text book.

Murray says, ‘the aim of this book is to make Aristotle’s political teaching available for politicians and citizens who have an interest in finding ways to think about the problems that face them in working to make their countries function effectively and well, so that their people can flourish’ (p. 6) Murray has developed this aim throughout the entire book.

From the outset Murray sets out to fend off criticisms from mainly western journalists, academics, political commentators and politicians who are critical of the way indigenous governments run the affairs of their own specific countries. It is, in fact, infuriating to the people concerned when biased perceptions are added to these regular criticisms. Very easily, commentators would go further by putting acridulous name tags on some of these fairly recently independent nations with labels such as *weak states* or even emphatically categorizing them as *failed states*. Certainly there are deficiencies in the way indigenous governments run the affairs of their own countries. But is it fair to say these are *failed states*? This exaggerated claim is what drives Murray to journey into the heart of the matter.

In order to do so Murray devises a method that he calls ‘excursion’. This then becomes the main structure of his book. Murray has ten chapters, an introduction, an epilogue and four appendices. The chapters of the book are developed within his
four ‘excursions’. Murray links his four ‘excursions’ to study the three main geographically mapped out territories of the Pacific region: The Melanesian, the Polynesian and the Micronesian societies. After presenting each of his four excursions Murray applies Aristotle’s book, *Politics*, utilizing Books I to VIII. Murray succinctly modifies Aristotle’s massive textual treatise on political philosophy, translating it into simple teachings and applying those lessons selectively to each of his four excursions. He makes additional references to Aristotle’s other books including commentaries on Aristotle’s works together with a selected bibliography. At the same time, he also accommodates modern European political theories, engaging them with Aristotle’s teaching to articulate concrete suggestions which he thinks are usefully applicable to each of his excursions. This is perhaps what Murray intends to do: to render Aristotle’s political philosophy into a relatively simple tool so that those who are unfamiliar with Aristotle’s work can also have some access to it and can actually use his ideas.

In his first excursion the author spells out at length a traditionally complex social welfare system found in most of the Melanesian societies known as ‘Wantok System’. This system has become deeply entrenched in the contemporary culture of some of these relatively recently independent Melanesian states: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Murray discusses the dynamics of this social trend that complicate the developmental movement from the many federated (tribal/units) groupings into the building of a single unified country, often hindering the progress of an entire nation. Finding some common values in Aristotle’s teaching on pre-political community in Book I and also Book II, Murray suggests that the Melanesian states will have to find ways to integrate the ‘Wantok System’ into *mainstream* politics. Such integration would need to be a solution rather than a problem.

In his second excursion Murray takes a closer look at the political crisis in Fiji. Most Melanesian societies are predominantly egalitarian. But in some parts of Fijian society, there exist organized structures governed by localized patricians (chiefs) who occupy these leadership positions through lineage systems. Murray reveals the complexities and the present-day tensions that go back to the colonial times which sparked the recent series of military coups: the tension between chiefs and commoners, the Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians and largely, also, between the religious affiliations of various sorts. Fiji’s crises have been long and its political future continues to remain uncertain. Finding some solutions to this multi-cultural, multi-racial and socially heterogeneous nation remains a demanding challenge. Applying mainly Aristotle’s Book VII and Book VIII, Murray suggests that the virtues of the constitution and the positive grounding of basic education can set a renewed sense of unity in modern day Fiji. Since Independence in 1970, Fiji has accommodated four different constitutions. In the light of the current plight a new constitution will have to be inclusive, just and beneficial to all Fijian citizens.

In his third excursion Murray discusses the Kingdom of Tonga’s ongoing political reforms and constitutional changes from monarchical rule to parliamentary democracy. Murray navigates Tonga’s long prehistory and historical cycles of
evolutionary passages of socio-political developments leading up to the permanent establishment of hierarchical structures in the society: the Monarchy with ‘distinct social classes – aristocrats (hou’ciki), chiefs (matapupule), commoners (tu’a) and slaves’ (p. 84). These ancient social structures remain today the bedrock of the ‘Tongan culture and affect political possibilities’ (p. 84). Although the presence of the Tongan monarchy in the era of European contact played an important role in creating stability by entering into various treaties with European powers instead of being overruled or colonized, it has come under intense pressure for its role in the governance of a modern state. The various implementations of constitutional amendments to parliamentary democracy have been a long struggle but have finally brought about a peaceful transition. Applying Aristotle’s Book V and Book VI, Murray suggests that a new transforming Tongan society will emerge when the citizens are allowed to participate in the process of nation building. This may eventually reduce the historical tensions and move the nation towards a robust exciting future.

In his fourth and final excursion Murray reveals a moving and yet powerful story of the Chamorro peoples of Mariana Islands in North Western Micronesia. This story is an illustration of the people of Micronesia’s resilience into preserving their livelihood in the midst of external adversities, including invasions, interventions and immigration. Unlike Tonga, the tiny island nations of Micronesia have been heavily inundated by a number of colonial powers, including Spain, Germany, Japan and the USA. They have been ruled, divided and sold. Numerous wars were fought on their soil. Today the peoples of Micronesia live under the shadow of the mighty ‘Americanism’. Murray presents a dim picture of a society struggling for the preservation of identity, culture, history, and the denial of political autonomy. Applying Aristotle’s Book II and Book VII, Murray discovers that the domestic economic system that the Micronesian society has known best over centuries, which has sustained their livelihood, can serve as their future strength. This can help link the isolated cluster of islands and enable them to preserve their families and kinships in the face of modern huge economic invasions.

The rapid geo-political landscaping in the region, coupled by radical social change and intense globalization, have made the Pacific region more vulnerable. Given the challenges in almost every aspect of human living in the Pacific societies, it is not easy to run a country without going through all the hurdles. The challenges of governance in the Pacific are overwhelming. Public institutions and systems set up by colonial powers are no longer functioning and, if they are, they are perhaps not relevant any more. Murray’s concluding point is clear: Pacific nations are not to be carbon copy functional entities, mimicking rules of western democracy. They will have to find their own ways to deal with issues known to them, and they alone can find solutions to their own problems.

Murray says the aim of his work was primarily to provide philosophical principles gleaned from Aristotle’s political philosophy. In Murray’s pen, Aristotle’s ancient ideas of a Pre-Political Community, the Constitution, the Political
Community and the notion of Good are among others that find their way to a new dialogue with the Pacific world. In mediating classical philosophy and contemporary culture Murray translates Aristotle’s notion of Good concretely and as central to social concerns with a particular focus on improving modern governance of contemporary societies of the Pacific region. Murray puts himself at their service by offering some alternatives so that better ways of governance can be achieved.

Murray, however, may have fallen short of raising suggestions directed at political challenges. These challenges may also include issues facing West Papua, Bougainville, New Caledonia and the Australian Aboriginal societies. Yet perhaps Murray’s philosophical contribution may give some incentive to others, in other fields of social science and including theology, to encourage them to apply the skills of their particular disciplines to the task of exposing still undisclosed areas needing their professional attention.

This is a book worth reading; I am sure Pacific Islanders will benefit immensely from it.