

TOWARDS A MELANESIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The quest for contextualising Christian theology is a common concern for, and an inevitable task to be fulfilled by, theologians in the churches of third-world countries. The fact is that they have to undertake this task because the theologies, which the missionaries imported from the Western world, or first world, are not relevant and intelligible to, or not even functional in, the various situations, cultures, and issues in the third world. The fruits of their labours have come back to us in the form of Liberation Theology, Yellow Theology, Black Theology, etc., and I would like to take these attempts as great and wonderful contributions to Christian theology.

The quest for a Melanesian theology is not new for us in Melanesia. We have expressed the desire and need for such a theology in the last ten years or so, but there seems to be no genuine interest, and so we have not put our heart and minds, and our best efforts, into its making. It is time that we take it more seriously. Perhaps our difficulty has been that we were not quite sure as to where we should start, and how we should go about it. We should appreciate and praise our missionaries for the interest and encouragement they have shown in their attempt to guide us, but we Melanesian theologians must be involved in the task. And the task is not simply “buying and selling” of modern theologies.

This short paper is intended not to give answers, but to raise issues, and to suggest possible guidelines for theologising in Melanesia. I think the questions of terminology, methodology, and the nature of Melanesian theology, should be raised, and possibly be resolved, in a Study Institute such as this. However, I hope the paper will stimulate

your minds and thinking and help to facilitate a fruitful discussion in this Study Institute.

1. WHAT TERMINOLOGY?

The first issue I would like to raise with you is the question of terminology. I have raised and discussed this question with my theology class, and, as a result of our discussion, we have agreed to believe that the term or phrase we employ to name our Melanesian theology should help us to define what it is that we are trying to do. That goes without saying: that whatever term, or phrase, or words, we use must be related to, or be known and important in our Melanesian context. And I would like to put before you three suggestions for your careful consideration.

(a) Melanesian Christian Theology:

This is our first choice. I am inclined to agree to this choice because the term Melanesian theology, which we seem to accept without due consideration, will create misunderstanding or raise suspicious, or even sceptical questions, in the minds of our sophisticated men and women of today, as well as our readers and critics. The term Melanesian Christian Theology would suggest a Christian theology or knowledge of God as experienced, expressed, and understood in a Melanesian context. This term is a real possibility when we consider the significance of the Christian *mythos*, which has become part of our worldview, as opposed to the term Melanesian theology. The latter may suggest a theology which deals solely and strictly with our Melanesian traditional religious experience, without relating that experience to our Christian faith and interpretation.

(b) Betel-nut Theology:

Our second choice is a funny one. However, this term Betel-nut Theology would suggest a theology or talk about God in Melanesia, where betel-nut chewing is a common feature and practice. I don't want to argue to defend or tell the whole story of the chewing process to justify this choice. All Melanesian people, who enjoy betel-nut chewing, should know that it has social, religious, and medical

functions in a Melanesian society. Briefly, it involves the use of three elements – betel-nut, leaf, and lime. The mixture of all three elements affects the result = red colour. Some preachers have used this analogy to illustrate or teach the unity and work of the Triune God in His divine acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Is that not betel-nut theology? I have personally witnessed several occasions when such an illustration was used – it rang many bells, and opened many windows, and was deeply appreciated.

(c) Coconut Theology:

Finally, this is the class's third choice. This term Coconut Theology would suggest a theology or study about God, which should be relevant to people whose ultimate concern is food, and who depend entirely on coconut as a sole means of livelihood. Needless to say, how vitally important and useful coconut is to many people in Melanesia, and in the whole of the South Pacific. For some, coconut is the sole means of livelihood. For others, it is the main or only source of economy. Coconut gives people money, food, drink, shelter, etc., etc. It helps people achieve better life, better living; it fulfils hopes and aspirations, and it gives confidence. I'm quite aware of the fact that people who live in the mountains and valleys of Papua New Guinea may not even have seen a coconut fruit before, and so, what I have said, may not be true for them. For them a pig is good example. However, for those who depend on and owe their lives to coconut, does it not represent God, the source of all things, the Lord and disposer of all creation? Kosuke Koyama entitled one of his books *Waterbuffalo Theology*⁴ for the similar simple fact that his Thai people depend on that animal for farming.

2. WHAT IS A MELANESIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

Perhaps this question is not quite relevant for us at this stage, for we cannot question what is not actually there. However, we can share thoughts and ideas for thinking and for enlightenment. We cannot understand what we mean by a Melanesian Christian Theology unless we define what it is that we are trying to do. Let me attempt to provide a definition. By Melanesian Christian Theology, I mean the reflective

expression and understanding of the Christian faith in the cultural, social, and religious experiences of the Melanesian Christian people within the Melanesian context as decisive for the existence of the Melanesian Christian communities. Divine revelation and faith, religious experience and theological reflection do not occur or take place in a vacuum, but always in a cultural context of the Christian communities. It is equally true and important to say that theologising should be a Christian community involvement. John Macquarrie implies the same point when he says, "Theology may be defined as a study, which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."⁵

We need to clarify and relate to our own context two points in this definition for our purpose. (a) Theology proceeds through believers' participation in, and reflection upon, Christian faith. This presupposes a Christian community, because participation and reflection are community events or actions. (b) Theology should express the content of our Christian faith in the clearest language we have. It means that theology has not only the task to reflect upon faith, but also to express its reflection in the clearest language and thought forms of the community involved.

When you consider the importance of language, and the fact that, in Melanesia, we have so many languages, with different versions of Pidgin English as a second language, and English as third, it seems an impossible task. Language is the most important medium of communication, without which theologising can never be done. But, at the same time, there is no harm in having oral theology, which can be communicated in the form of story-telling. Melanesian custom stories, myths, and legends have been preserved and passed on from one generation to another in this way. Why not Melanesian Christian theology?

A Melanesian Christian theology should be genuinely Melanesian in forms of reflection, but truly Christian in meaning. It should arise, or evolve, out of the Christian communities, characterised

by elements of faith and hope in Jesus Christ, in whom the people of God in Melanesia have a new faith that has awakened them to a new life. At the same time, it must be in constant dialogue with the rest of the Christian church in the world. The question now is: What is the criterion for developing such a theology? Or what determines such a theology? If it is to be Christian in meaning, and Melanesian in form, then the criterion by which we articulate it is that it should be based on biblical faith, and what really concerns us in our Christian communities. To put it in Paul Tillich's terms: "The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object insofar as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us."⁶ In other words, we must take seriously the questions of hermeneutics, as well as anthropology.

A Melanesian Christian theology should take seriously the cultural and religious context, be grounded on what concerns us ultimately, and reflect our faith in God, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Without this, there can be no theology. It should take into account the patterns of meanings and valuations, which have been projected in the Christian traditions and religious wisdom of Melanesian communities, so as to exemplify and relate fully that *mythos* to Christian experience in Melanesia. Then we dare not overlook the non-Christian sector of the community, as well as those new sects that are invading Melanesian countries.

There is more to be said, but we shall touch on the rest when we come to deal with the last section of this paper. So far, I have touched on many issues and raised many questions. That should give you enough to play with in your discussion.

3. WHAT METHODOLOGY?

May I give a word of warning? What I will be saying in this section will overlap with some of the things we have touched on in the previous sections. One is tempted to do that when he is dealing with mere ideas. I would like to introduce this section with a quotation from Bernard Lonergan:

For if the gospel is to be preached to all nations (Matt 28:19) still it is not to be preached in the same manner to all. If one is to communicate with persons of another culture, one must use the resources of their culture. To use simply the resources of one's own culture is not to communicate with others, but to remain locked up in one's own. At the same time, it is not enough simply to employ the resources of the other culture. One must do so creatively. One has to discover the manner in which the Christian message can be expressed effectively and accurately in the other culture.⁷

This is a very important principle. As Melanesian teachers and theologians, we are called to interpret and reflect the Christian message within our religious and cultural ethos. But the fact is, this is indigenisation of theology, or to use a more dynamic contemporary term, a contextualisation of theology in process. It begins by applying this principle as a method. And, in our attempts to formulate a Melanesian Christian Theology, I would like to suggest the following propositions for a methodology. We must be sure that,

It must be formulated in the language of our people, not merely in terms of the words used, but in the people's terms of reference in their culture.

It must use a methodology that is a logic, and set of procedures, which make sense in that cultural context, and be inclusive; and it should leave no gap between different sectors of the communities in Melanesia.

It must address itself to issues and questions that are real to the people and should ignore those that are not relevant to our people.

It must use appropriate literary forms and genres that are relevant for the purpose, such as poetry, wise words, or religious terms of Melanesia.

It must be evolved from the Christian community, and all the members of that community must be involved in the task.

It must be open and free to invite the Christian community to suggest, and to make constructive verbal expressions.

It must avoid syncretism, and the tendency to confuse, or make the gospel become culture-bound. It must allow the gospel to transcend and transform our Melanesian cultures.

It must be Christocentric, biblical, prophetic, and use hermeneutical methods, and should avoid simple buying and selling of existing theologies.

It must be open-ended, and subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so as to be free to be renewed and be functional in the developing countries in Melanesia.⁸

For discussion: What would be more useful for our purpose in Melanesia that must be included in the above list?

CONCLUSION

I have simply tried to share some of my ideas and concerns with you in our Study Institute, and I am not laying down rules and regulations for the contextualisation of theology in Melanesia. That task belongs to the whole church in Melanesia, not a self-appointed person, let alone an individual. If our aim and intention for a Melanesian Christian theology is to be genuinely Melanesian in form, then it must use the method which requires that, whatever religious phenomena are examined, it must seek to explicate the essence of faith and relate it to our Christian faith and experience in Melanesia. If, on the other hand, our aim and intention is to be truly Christian in meaning, then we must understand, interpret, and express in our reflection the revelation of God in the Old Testament, and the fullness of that revelation in Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

REFERENCES

⁴ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, London UK: SCM Press, 1974.

⁵ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, London UK: SCM Press, 1977, p. 1.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 12.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York NY: Herder & Herder, 1973, p. 308.

⁸ Some of these are slightly adapted from Charles R. Taber, "The Limits of Indigenisation in Theology", in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, Charles H. Kraft, and Tom N. Wisley, eds, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1979, pp. 386-387.