

INSTANCES OF “GOD-TALKS” IN MELANESIA

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INTRODUCTION

“Theology” is God’s word and verdict in human situations of real life. This understanding of theology makes the context from which “theology” is spoken, a priority in determining theological reflections. The writer speaks of “theological reflections”,¹⁹ in the sense that theology, at least in Melanesia at this point of time, can only be deduced from attempts by people to state and speak of what God is saying and doing in their contexts. It follows, therefore, that there is yet time for some systematic accounting to be done in Melanesia. In the meantime, however, we think of people and areas in Melanesia where we locate how people see and recognise how God becomes meaningful (God-talk?) in their contexts of speech, religious witness, and work.

For purposes of identification, instances of “God-talks” in Melanesia can be assessed from three general broad categories. They are as follows:

- A. Class-room attempts – This includes theological teachings in theological Colleges, seminars by people in theological contexts, and students’ writings, mainly their theses.
- B. Personal reflections and involvements – This refers to individuals, whose voices are written or heard in Melanesia.
- C. Communal reflections – This refers to new religious movements in Melanesia.

Having stated some brief surveys on each of the three categories outlined above, a short section (D) on a possible theology of mission in Melanesia presents the writer's own critique of churches in Melanesia.

The paper's real purpose is simply to highlight some issues on theological questions, and help readers to begin to assess their own theological evaluations of their own contexts.

A. CLASS-ROOM ATTEMPTS

All the theological schools in Melanesia have attempted, in one way or another, to interpret European theological thinking with that of Melanesian thought-forms. A quick glance at our various library collections of books will help us to guess that each denomination puts special emphasis on its founder's theological thinking. So much has been imparted in Melanesian minds that names such as Luther for the Lutherans, Thomas Aquinas for the Catholics, John Wesley for the Methodists, and John Calvin for the Presbyterians, etc., have become almost as traditional as the names of our ancestors. We inherit, as Melanesians, the "end-product" of Western theological thinking, so that it is, at times, difficult to venture into new areas ourselves to speak about new truths in theological matters. Western theological thinking is reinforced by Western biblical-exegetical developments in such a way that even interpreting the scriptures is not easy for Melanesians to plunge themselves into.

Missionaries, for the last ten years or so, have made attempts to assimilate theological thinking in Melanesia. The late Revd Dr Ronald G. Williams attempted to interpret the theology of atonement in his little book *The Meaning of the Cross*.²⁰ Students at Rarongo Theological College, during the initial development of the College, were taught to assimilate Christ's work of redemption through Melanesian sacrificial offerings.

A later development of the College was the concern to cater for the experiences of students entering the College in theological

matters. From 1972 to 1982, Rarongo College developed a thematic approach to theological learning, picking out themes relevant to Melanesian scenes and bringing about areas of teaching in history, theology, pastoral care, etc., to play on themes as such as gods, spirits, cargo cults, nation-building, etc. While much is yet to be determined on how much indigenous this teaching could be, it helped students to develop their own ways of thinking, as they focused their minds on the Melanesian “scenes”.²¹

To assess real issues in Melanesian Christian contexts, and to help people to recognise and “baptise” Christian values into their contexts, has been the thrust of seminars led by Dr Cliff Wright, a Christian educationist, around the Pacific in recent years.²² Cliff Wright believes, like the social Darwinists, that Melanesians come out of “primal worldviews”, and that their thinking could be developed progressively into the Christian way. What theological insights people receive out of these seminars, and what practical implications they have for people are yet to be determined.

A more academic exercise in the attempt to contextualise theology in Melanesia was made by William Burrows.²³ Burrows’ “method of theologising” in Melanesia has much to be commended, when Melanesian theologians begin to identify their theological issues, and enter into systematisation, so long as it is remembered they are not removed from real life.

Theological reflections by students need some recognition in writing. Besides other attempts by Rarongo Theological College students,²⁴ there are two attempts that need some careful thought for they both focus on traditional culture, as exemplified by the Christian Fellowship Church in the Solomon Islands,²⁵ and some comparative analysis of Independent Church Movements in Africa. One is by the late Revd Joe Gaqurae.²⁶ Joe takes incarnation as the crucial basis for contextualisation and indigenisation of theology in Melanesia. Speaking from a cultural area where people believed that Christ is a “fat”, “clever”, and “white”, superior person, an identity exemplified

by missionary colonialism, Joe calls on Melanesians to think of Christ as a “Melanesian Christ”:

What do we mean by the phrase “Melanesian Christ”? First, we do not intend to water down the fact that, historically, He was a Jew. He would still remain as a historical figure for reference. A point that we may want to affirm is that He was a Jew, but, in humanity, He shared certain characteristics, which a Melanesian also shares with the Jewish race. As far as common human characteristics are concerned, Christ was both a Jew and a Melanesian. A Melanesian is not a Jew, but he is also not entirely different from him. They are both human beings created in the image of God (Gen 1:26). Both are sinners, and in need of salvation (Rom 3:23). Second, we do not attempt to *make* Christ *become* a Melanesian. We cannot make Him a Melanesian. He is already a Melanesian. The incarnation affirms the fact that He is already a Melanesian. He has been indigenised, or localised, by God Himself. We cannot do what already has been done. We only have to recognise the fact. . . . Third, it is not pigmentation of skin that we are concerned with, but Melanesian humanness. As far as pigmentation is concerned, He was a Jew. The concern is that, in the Melanesian eye of faith, Christ must be Melanesian. If it was possible for Christ to become a Jew, what can stop Him from becoming a Melanesian to me? If this is impossible and blasphemous, then the incarnation is a false story, and has no meaning for a Melanesian.²⁷

It is only through the idea of a Melanesian Christ taking its basis on the doctrine of incarnation that beliefs in the resurrection of Christ, Christ as neighbour, and Christ as creator, can be made meaningful in Melanesian contexts.

Joe’s assessment of incarnation would seem to reflect belief in the Christian Fellowship Church, an offshoot of Methodism since 1960, that the founder, the so-called Holy Mama (Silas Eto), was God. While Joe mainly read excerpts from Dr Tippett’s work,²⁸ and

the writer's thesis,²⁹ Atabani Tahu, through reading and research, attempts to rationalise the concept of "Holy Mama", as the basis upon which belief in a Christian God can be made more meaningful in Melanesia.³⁰ This study should be fruitful, when one assesses traditional beliefs about God/Spirits, the processes leading to the exaltation of Holy Mama as God, the uses of dreams, visions, and trances as forms of revelations from the divine realm, and how one could reflect these in relation to Christian beliefs about God. It could prove to be a starting point from which the theology of God and the "Holy Spirit" could be made.

B. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND INVOLVEMENTS

Individual Melanesians have made their contributions in theological writings. These writings came out either through study and reflections on theological issues in Melanesia, or as part and parcel of their social and religious involvements with societies in Melanesian contexts. While the scope of this paper may not permit us to do justice to all, a selection of such individuals should serve our purpose.³¹ Bernard Narokobi, a lawyer by profession, could be considered a lay "theologian". He, I believe, has initiated a theology of the revelation of God through the Melanesian worldviews.³² Contrary to so-called traditional "neo-orthodox theologians", who over-stressed God's special revelation within the history of the Jewish people as the negation, as well as at the expense, of other worldviews and cultures, Narokobi asserts that Melanesian animism is a potential area where God, in the concept of the "spirits", can be seen mightily at work in the Melanesian context. The Melanesian world is full of the *dynamis* of God, and we, as Melanesian, experience the "total vision" of Him within our secular world. Within a world, where science and modern technology have tried to push God to the peripheries, animistic worldviews could become a potential area for Christian apologetics of our time.

While Narokobi should be given the credit for speaking of God manifesting His works within our world, Silas Eto, the Holy Mama of the Christian Fellowship Church, Solomon Islands, claims that God in Christ can be reincarnated in the lives of men and women

who follow His footsteps. He speaks of “chewing” or eating the biblical insights (only after he read the whole bible from Genesis to Revelation more than 10 times), and swallowing them; the making of human limbs – arms, hands, feet, nose, eyes, ears, mouths, head, heart, etc., into the limbs of Jesus Christ; and his own exposition of John 14:8-11, which suggests that, if Christ the man can be God’s Son, we, too, who resemble something of Christ, should be called sons of God. According to Holy Mama, when man’s life resembles the life of God, his life becomes a daily worship to God, and there is no need for Christians to go to church everyday to worship God.³³ During his own search for religious authenticity and meaning, Holy Mama could remind us of Bonhoeffer’s phrases of “religionless Christianity”, and man “come of age”. His ideas could also be stimulating for people who study the inner meanings of the world’s religions’ temples,³⁴ where the temples are seen, or meant to represent, ideals of the inner man. When man inherits what is desired from the temple rituals, he no longer needs the rituals, for his life is already a temple of God.

On a more social and religious level, Fr John Momis and Revd Bishop Leslie Boseto have already spoken loud and clear to us. Fr John, a Catholic priest, considers his role as a priest to be involved with issues relating to social justice. For him, it is within the political arena of Papua New Guinea that people’s liberation must be determined.³⁵ By entering into politics to exercise his “priestly role”, Fr John has “de-sacralised” his “traditional priestly role”, which would not allow him to be involved with the state. Today’s pope would certainly not have encouraged it!

The church/state relationship has always been a cold point of dialogue as far as churches in Melanesia are concerned, but for Fr John – and one could also consider Fr Walter Lini (Anglican) and the Revd Fred Timakata (Presbyterian) of Vanuatu, who struggled to lead their people to Independence in 1980 – a new theology of the relationship between the church and the state has been developing. Such theology would take national unity and independence as the

arena within which the people of God demonstrate their Christian witness and service.

National unity and independence are recognised as very vital by the Revd Leslie Boseto, former Moderator of the United Church, and now Bishop of Solomon Islands Region of the United Church. According to Bishop Boseto, the church is the people who make up the unity and the independence of the country. This provides an arena for an ecumenical witness rather than a stress on denominational differences. Let him speak his own words:

In Melanesia, we really need to emphasise that people who participate in God's love are the church. The time of looking at the Bishop, or the minister, or the general secretary, as *the church* must be continually discouraged. We need to encourage more lay members to actively participate. . . . It is my strong hope that when all Christians in Melanesia are caught up by the activity of God's Spirit, then we will rise above our denominational boxes to see each other as brothers and sisters. Our relationships with our denominations are not so important; relationship with the Lord of the church is very important.³⁶

Couldn't we consider Leslie as a "father" of ecumenical theology for Melanesia? Certainly his involvements with the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC), the Pacific Conference of Churches, Solomon Islands Christian Association, the Melanesian Institute, Commission for World Mission of the Uniting Church in Australia, Council for World Mission, and the World Council of Churches speak for themselves. This is not to overlook his grass-roots conferences on the theme of "The whole gospel for the whole man of the whole world", which are basically inter-denominational and communally-oriented in the Solomon Islands societies.

C. COMMUNAL REFLECTIONS

- (a) What does God require of us? Let us do justly, and walk humbly with our God. This seemed to be the tone

of the message of two church leaders' ecumenical meetings held in Lae, January 1979, and Port Moresby, 1980. These meetings were convened in preparation for the WCC's Melbourne Consultation on "Your Kingdom Come". These seminars, whatever they speak for, point to one direction. Common efforts by Christians, united witness to bring about justice in development, must be the direction towards which all churches in Melanesia work. Injustice is seen as unlimited freedom by the exploiting few, as are laziness, dishonesty, and deception, and Christians are called to serve the cause of the under-privileged, the poor, and the oppressed.³⁷ Here, we may visualise a theology of liberation based on Christian community solidarity.

- (b) Can Christ's incarnation be reenacted? Mention was already made of Silas Eto, the Holy Mama of the CFC, believing that man can resemble God in some way. From his point of view, this is true also from a religious biblical point of view. The concept of Holy Mama as God, however, came from the community of believers of the CFC. To them Holy Mama is God, because he forgives sins, heals the sick, raises the dead and is seen in visions together with Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. He is, therefore, to them, a spirit, for God is spirit.
- (c) Is there a theology of the Holy Spirit? For the CFC, the Holy Spirit is identical with Jesus Christ, God, and Holy Mama. Some people of Misima (Papuan Islands, Milne Bay Province) associated the great spirit *Yabuwaine* with God's Holy Spirit.³⁸ The spirits, particularly in reference to new religious movements in Melanesia, is a potential area where some theologies of the Holy Spirit can be deduced. Thanks to the efforts of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, in publishing three series of *Point*, edited by Wendy Flannery, on *Religious Movements in Melanesia*,³⁹ Melanesians now have a wealth of materials and resources, at least from the grass-roots of

the churches, as far as religious experience is concerned, to think theologically about the movement of the Holy Spirit within and amongst their own people. The writer believes that it is from the point of view of the leading and intervention of the “Holy Spirit” (in Melanesian terms) that both a theology of God, and the hope of an *eschaton*, can be given their meanings, particularly on issues related to liberation.⁴⁰

D. THEOLOGY OF MISSION?

While Melanesian churches speak on relevant issues relating to their churches and nations, they lack a forward and outward looking into the world to enable them to conceptualise a theology of mission outside of their cocoons.⁴¹ A very close friend of mine, in a personal letter to me, expressed this concern in general, as he visualised the nature of relationships existing between the United Church, the churches in Melanesia, MCC, and PCC. He stated that, while the United Church was committed to the idea of renewal from within itself, he

thought we needed to reach out more into the wider society . . . to push our ecumenical vision beyond MCC, and dialogue with the Lutheran and the Anglican churches, not overlooking the developments which have been taking place in our relationships with the Evangelical Alliance. It seems nothing new has developed from within, and even our bishops are “locked” into “house-keeping” roles.⁴²

If we, as Christian churches, are locked within our own cells, we can never be true to Christ’s great commission (Matt 28:18-20) to make Christ’s disciples in the world. Perhaps we, as churches in Melanesia, need to look closely at a number of issues which might help our churches to be a little bit more “missionary-minded”.

First, and perhaps foremost, we need to free ourselves from a great sense of dependency on money channelled through our churches in the name of “mission work” by our overseas partner

churches. As far as the writer is concerned, there are two things which are quite alarming about our dependency on overseas aid. First, for the United Church, the Anglicans, the Church of Melanesia (and Catholics also?) between 70 per cent and 95 per cent of their annual income comes from overseas. Closely connected to this, from the United Church's point of view, when people talked of "Partnership in Mission and Development",⁴³ they often asserted that we as Melanesians are poor in monetary terms, but are rich in people as resources. When we have people to do things, but have no money resources to act upon our Christian calling, we have no power to implement our sense of mission within our society and the world. The writer believes that this is an issue which MCC, SICA, PCC, and other world bodies in relation to church and society issues, need to look into carefully, and envisage some practical planning for awareness towards some practical ends.

Second, and perhaps equally important, is the present attitude of our overseas partner churches (the co-called First World countries), who hang on to their financial "powers" in the name of "missionary work", at the neglect and expense of our work as churches for mission (even to their own doorsteps). Instead of listening to lively theological reflections now at work with third-world countries,⁴⁴ and enabling them, with monetary resources, to implement their work theologically, the Western churches are treating the Melanesian churches like children who beg for money mainly for their domestic affairs. While transnational companies and foreign investors teach us that money can be extracted from our natural resources and used elsewhere, our partner churches overseas still think of our countries as poor countries which can only be *given money* from their own "capitals". This goes to prove that, while we think theologically, our brothers and sisters overseas still think of us as recipient churches. From a United Church point of view this situation needs to be looked into very carefully within the infrastructure of the Council for World Mission, the Commission of World Mission of the Uniting Church in Australia, and the Council for Mission and Ecumenical Co-operation of the Methodists and Presbyterians in New Zealand. Unless and until we are sharing some

“equal resources”, in terms of people and money, there is no such thing as equal partners in mission and development.

Finally, it seems to the writer that, while the world, as far as churches are concerned, is entering on an area for “equal sharing” in the mission of the church, the churches in Melanesia are still suffering from the shock of neo-colonialism. Words like “nationalism”, “localisation”, “indigenisation”, “the local contexts”, even “incarnation”, if not properly looked into in a wider church context, can kill any lively sense of missionary endeavour. Let us hope these words give way to ecumenical ventures, which may lead to a creative sense of mission for the church.

CONCLUSION SUMMARY

This paper does *not* present a general survey of theological issues in Melanesia, rather, it is a presentation of some theological reflections in Melanesia, particularly by Melanesians. These reflections need to be properly recorded, further analysed, and, if need be, systemised to signify some authentic (if not homegrown and syncretistic) theological contributions by the people of Melanesia. Particularly important in this respect are theological reflections by individuals and communities, which may look quite “heretical” from a traditional Christian point of view, but quite authentic and cultural, from Melanesian points of view. To ignore these is simply to ignore theological issues, which are based on authentic religious expressions. These are lively local theological contributions that need to be vocalised.

While local theological contributions seek identity and relevancy within the natures of local churches and religious movements, both the local churches and overseas partner churches need to work together, carefully, to discern some Melanesian theologies of the church’s mission to wider societies in Melanesia and the world. If we believe the catholicity of the church, then we must strike a careful balance between the church within the local contexts and the church as universal. This is not only the

responsibility of Melanesian churches, but it is also a responsibility towards our partner churches overseas.

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¹⁹ The writer is a United Church pastor, and the paper is written from a United Church stand point.

²⁰ R. G. Williams, *The Meaning of the Cross*, Rabaul PNG: Trinity Press, 1972.

²¹ R. G. Williams, "Relevancy in Curriculum Planning: Alternative Approaches: Rarongo Theological College", in Robert Jamieson, ed., *Theological Education in Melanesia Today, Point* (1/1976), pp. 153-159.

²² *Melanesian Culture and Christian Faith, Report of Workshop, Auki, Malaita, October 12-26, 1978; New Hebridean Culture and Christian Faith: two heads and two hearts, New Hebrides Workshop Report, April 19-May 3, 1979*, published by PCC Research Centre, Vila; *Seeds of the Word: Tongan Culture and Christian Faith, Report on Workshop, June 20-July 3, 1979*, PCC Research Centre, Vila; *Not to Destroy but to fulfil: Southern Highlands Cultures and Christian Faith: Report on the Workshop held in Mendi, July 23-August 3, 1980*, Bernie Collins, ed.; *Christ and Kiribati Culture: Kiribati Workshop Report, July 12-24, 1981*; Two other seminars, one at Malmaluan (1978) and another at Rarongo Theological College (1982), were not published.

²³ William Burrows, "Theologising in the Melanesian context today", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues, Point* (1&2/1977), pp. 242-255.

²⁴ Other relevant theses which can also be considered are as follows: Robertson Bato, "A Christian theology of liberation for Melanesia", B.D. thesis, Rabual PNG: Rarongo, 1980; Daniel B. Aaron, "The role of the church in liberation and development: with special reference to the New Hebrides", B.D. thesis, Rabual PNG: Rarongo, 1976; Simeon Namunu, "Ancestors and the Holy Spirit: in search of an indigenous theology in view of spirits in Misiman traditional religion and the Holy Spirit in Christianity", B.D. thesis, Rabaul PNG: Rarongo, 1983.

²⁵ For details of the Christian Fellowship Church, see Frances H. Harwood, "The Christian Fellowship Church: a revitalisation movement in Melanesia", Ph.D. thesis, Chicago IL: Chicago University, 1971; and Esau Tuza, "The Emergence of the Christian Fellowship Church: a Historical view of Silas Eto, Founder of the Christian Fellowship Church", M.A. thesis, Waigani PNG: University of Papua New Guinea, 1975; and Tuza's contribution to the MATS' symposium in this issue.

²⁶ The late Revd Joe Gaqurae passed away on March 22, 1985. His article "Indigenisation as incarnation: the concept of a Melanesian Christ", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia, Point* (1&2/1977), pp. 146-153, came out of his research and comparative study of the CFC with some African Independent churches, which culminated in his B.D. thesis, "Towards indigenising of the United Church in Western Solomon Islands, with special attention to the Christian Fellowship Church and the African Independent churches", 1976.

²⁷ Gaqurae, "Indigenisation as incarnation", pp. 150-151.

²⁸ A. R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity: a Study in Growth and Obstruction*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967.

²⁹ Tuza, "The Emergence of the Christian Fellowship Church".

³⁰ Atabani Tahu, "The Holy Mama as a Basis Towards Understanding . . . of God in Melanesia", B.D. thesis being written, 1985.

³¹ Other articles, which could be considered in this respect, are as follows: Dr Sione A. Havea, "The Pacificness of Theology", in *Reo Pasifika Voice of the Pacific*, Brian MacDonald Milne, ed., (1980), pp. 81-84; John Kadiba, "In search of a Melanesian Theology"; Polonhou S. Pokawin, "Interactions between indigenous and Christian traditions: with reference to Papua New Guinea", and Ilaitia Sevati, "Themes for theological thinking in contemporary Fiji" – all three papers were delivered during the Brisbane consultation on "Black Australasian Christianity", August 1981 (to be published by Orbis Books, Garry Trompf, ed.).

³² Two articles by Bernard Narokobi, which are particularly relevant to the present discussion are "What is religious experience for a Melanesian", in John D'Arcy May, ed., *Living Theology in Melanesia: a Reader, Point 8* (1985), and "Divine presence in the Pacific", in *Reo Pasifika Voice of the Pacific* (1980), pp. 68-70. His book, *The Melanesian Way*, Henty Olela, ed., Port Moresby PNG: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980, could be seen as an attempt, from a more secular point of view, at a theology of liberation in Melanesia.

³³ See Esau Tuza, "The demolition of the Christian church buildings by the ancestors", a paper delivered at the Brisbane consultation on "Black Australasian Christianity" (to be published; see endnote 13).

³⁴ Vincent van Nuffell, *The Theology of the Temple*, Waigani PNG: UPNG Press, 1975.

³⁵ John Momis, "Values for Involvement: Theology and Politics", and P. Murphy, "Momis' theology of politics interpreted" – both in *Catalyst* 5-3 (1975), pp. 3-46. See also John Momis, "Renew the face of the earth", in *Your Kingdom Come: Partnership in Mission and Development, Point* (2/1980), pp. 7-15.

³⁶ Leslie Boseto, *I Have a Strong Belief*, Glen Bays, ed., Madang PNG: Unichurch Books, 1983, p. 76.

³⁷ See Minutes of "Workshop on partnership in mission and development", January 1979, pp. 27-28.

³⁸ Namunu, "Ancestors and the Holy Spirit".

³⁹ Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (1), *Point 2* (1983); *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), *Point 3* (1983); *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), *Point 4* (1984).

⁴⁰ John Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977. For an interesting assessment of the indigenisation of theology in reference to Melanesian religions, see Harold W. Turner, "Old and New Religions in Melanesia", in James Knight, ed., *Challenges and Possibilities for the Study of Religion in Melanesia, Point* (2/1978), pp. 5-29.

⁴¹ The writer cannot apply this to Vanuatu, but perhaps in relation to New Caledonia.

⁴² Private communication.

⁴³ In the consultation between the United Church and overseas partner churches, bases for mission were spelt out, but specific areas for missionary ventures were not spelt out. See "Special Report: Partners Together with Christ", *Catalyst* 14-3, (1984), pp. 261-267.

⁴⁴ Compare John S. Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church", in *Mission Trends No 3: Third-World Theologies*, Gerard H. Anderson, and Thomas F. Stransky, eds, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1976, pp. 6-18.