

# **COPING WITH NUCLEAR EXILE**

## **Educational, Economic and Religious Influences on a Kiribati Community in the Solomon Islands**

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*In the early 1960s, a nuclear device known as “Starfish” was exploded high in the atmosphere. Due to the resulting contamination, the people of the Phoenix Islands (part of the former Gilbert Islands, now Kiribati) had to be resettled on the island of Wagina, off the south-east tip of Choiseul in the Solomon Islands. This sad story is a parable for Pacific peoples entering the nuclear age.*

*The author, himself a member of this group, which he refers to as “the Gilbertese”, asked his people, with the aid of a detailed questionnaire, to what extent Western education and Christian faith have helped them to cope with this experience of exile. The results formed the basis of a B.D. presented to Rarongo Theological College in October, 1985. Using the techniques of “local” or “oral history”, the thesis examines the impact of educational, economic and religious forces from the people’s point of view. Space permits us to reproduce, with some omissions, only the concluding chapter, in which the author makes a stirring appeal to his people not to abandon their faith, despite the pressures of an unfamiliar environment.*

### **The Impact of Education, Economics and Religious Pluralism**

Our diagnosis of the current forces existing within the Gilbertese community at Wagina confirms that we are sharing with the developed countries the rapid and feverish developments in scientific and technological knowledge, and the effects of vast social, economical, political, educational, and religious change – some would rather say “upheaval”. Even though the term “development and change” is what everyone talks about, the majority tend to skip the conflict, interruption, and destructive aspects of these developments. The present impact of the forces acting on them has raised concern by the village people, particularly those who have been oppressed, and those who may not

have been more privileged than the others in terms of education, employment, money, material goods, and someone to support them. From their experiences, we are able to see some of the areas, which have called the attention of every Christian to the need for apologetics in our Melanesian context.

In actual fact, the concern, work, and task is already too large for us to cover in our Christian apologetic approach. Our theological concern here is crystal clear, but who is to initiate this Christian defence? It is not the selected few, the clergy, or any other church taskmaster or taskmistress, but it is a call, both to the individual Christian and the community of faith.<sup>1</sup>

I feel and believe that any Christian, serious in his/her faith, should feel free to say that there is something wrong in our present educational system, economic system, the belief and teaching of other religious movements, and many more. Then, we have to present what we, as Christians, believe should be the way to tackle their impact. We ought to show how to live among these present forces, and make others recognise that everything is God's blessing to us – our possessions, money, education, and our all

### **Some Suggested Sources to Combat the Impact of the Existing Forces**

It is, therefore, my plea to all Christians on Wagina, the Roman Catholics, and the United church members, to work with solidarity, using whatever resources are available, together with their faith. Resources could be the Bible, which is already in the Gilbertese language, plus their Christian faith experience.

As Christians, we need to present the reliability and authenticity of the Bible. It has a lot to say to the kind of situation we are now in. This, we shall see, as we deal with the problems of education, economics, and religious pluralism in subsequent paragraphs. If we

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<sup>1</sup> The "community of faith", I mean here, is that as understood in the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA). The members are the United church of the Solomon Islands, the Church of Melanesia, the Roman Catholic church, and the South Seas Evangelical church (SSEC).

want to present the Christian faith experience, we are saying that there is something unique about this experience, which we can share, explain, or revive for our confused and troubled villagers.

Changes and development over the 2,000 years of the history of Christianity are vast, and there is no way we can compare that to Christianity in the Gilbertese society, which is just over 132 years old. Remember that our apologetic is addressed to a community of Catholics and Protestants, therefore, I shall not attempt a discussion on any exposition of Christian doctrine. I shall only try to point out similarities and differences between these two denominations, which deserve the characteristic of the name “Christian”. I will use these to combat the impact of the forces at work.

Other possible resources for our defence would be the different disciplines within the church, for example, theology, biblical studies, Christian education, church history, and so forth; and the different church organisations, such as, the Sunday school, youth fellowship groups, the women’s fellowship in the United church, and for the Catholics, the different Orders with specific responsibilities. They certainly all have important roles to play in our Christian apologetics.

To carry out these tasks, we need people. They need not be Christians, because I believe every person has the image of God,<sup>2</sup> and is accountable to do the best for his Creator, for his fellowman, and for himself/herself. We also know and believe that God uses all peoples for his purpose.<sup>3</sup> There are many educated and experienced men and women with Western- or European-oriented knowledge and skill, who will become very useful in giving us help against these forces.

The above-mentioned resources are the basis of our apologetics to the Gilbertese community, facing the impact of the current forces discussed in this article. These resources can be outlined in three main approaches, with which we could present the Christian apologetics:

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<sup>2</sup> So God created human beings, making them to be like Himself (Gen 1:27).

<sup>3</sup> God, in Old Testament times, used different heathen nations to punish, or to teach, His chosen people, the Jews. For example, Nebuchadnezzar, ruling the Israelites in Babylonia; the Philistines, conquering and defeating King Saul, etc.

- (1) Christ was, and still is, the centre, and key factor, for apologetics. We could say He was the greatest apologist who ever lived. His whole ministry reflected the apologetic concerns of His time, which are still relevant to our time.
- (2) People's faith experiences, that is, people of the past, in Bible days, and right down through history, until our time. People and their faith experiences have presented the uniqueness of the Christian faith, and are still relevant for us today.
- (3) The third thing here is the Bible, in which we find the historical account of Christ and great men and women of the faith. I believe that the statement, "The Bible, in which we find the historical account of . . .", clarifies the reliability and the authenticity of the Bible, a point I feel most essential in Christian apologetics.

As we present our Christian apologetics, we shall follow the order of education, economic system, and religious pluralism. However, where there is a connection between them, a discussion on the relevant sections shall be dealt with to avoid repetition of ideas in our apologetics approach.

## **Apologetics in a Gilbertese Community within the Melanesian Context**

### *Education and Traditional Culture*

Is the present educational system designed to meet the meaning and purpose of human life? What conflicting views do the people have about what human nature really is? When a person asks himself/herself these kinds of questions in relation to education, the economic system, the religious life, etc., the answer should not come into conflict with his/her Christian faith and moral life. However, evidence shows that Western formal education has caused much conflict, and has drawn more and more people away from the Christian faith.

As Christians, we believe in a God who creates, and who is the source of all things, including knowledge. This is why the writer of

Proverbs says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge . . .” (Prov 1:7). If God is the source of all knowledge, then there is no such thing as true knowledge, apart from God. Let me give my own experience. I was at Goldie College from 1966 to 1968, and at King George VI Secondary School from 1969 to 1973. In both these schools, from primary education to secondary, “Bible Knowledge”, as it was called, was taught, but only to meet the requirements of the Education Department, in order to qualify students for the “Standard Seven Certificate” and the “Cambridge School Certificate”. I can well remember that there were no emphases on learning about how one sees God in one’s life, or, what one might call today, man’s spiritual formation in the Bible lessons we were taught, rather we were expected to learn and know as much as possible from the texts given, in order to enable us to answer all the examination questions, and get a pass or credit as a result. Therefore, religious subjects may be taught, but only taught to fulfil academic requirements, not in a way to motivate the learner to give reverence to the Lord as the overall giver of knowledge.

The education system does not teach our people to live as God wants us to live; rather it teaches and encourages the people to be self-centred, materialistic, and alienated from their faith in God. Are we becoming like those whom the writer of Proverbs calls “fools (who) despise wisdom and instruction?” (Prov 1:7b RSV). I don’t want to call someone a fool, but the Bible has so much truth in calling people fools, when there is moral corruption in the individual, and in the society, when we despise wisdom and instruction.

To the educated Gilbertese students and workers, it is my plea that we use all our wisdom in building and transforming our custom and culture, instead of condemning it just because we think we have received Western formal education. Do not try to deny your rightful identity as Gilbertese only because you have acquired knowledge of the West.

Let us not forget that God was already at work among our people, even before the arrival of the first missionaries. The people knew how to love and care for one another, to share and support each other with goods, ideas, etc. Did not these reflect the nature of God?

Therefore, to condemn our culture can mean losing some of the very important things which Christianity today tries to promote. We can encourage our people to renounce those aspects of culture which do no good, but harm, to the people. Let us also ensure that magic practice, worship of spirits, and their ancestral spirits, etc., cannot be equalised with Christian principles, otherwise we would fall into syncretism.

To the elders, and the simple village man and woman, it is my earnest entreaty that we should not be so conservative in our outlook, but to conserve only those traditional and cultural aspects, which still have values in our present time. People should be encouraged, firstly, to accept, and, secondly, to innovate ideas, methods, ways of life, and so forth, which will bring peace, development, and benefit to our people.

To everyone, that is, to our new generations in the process of acquiring formal Western education, those who have taken up employment after hard years of studies, and, finally, to our elders and leaders of each kinship group, I would agree with them in their assumption that “formal Western education results in the process of (deculturalisation) acculturation”,<sup>4</sup> that so much of culture is changing. “These changes are seen as being both universal, and in one direction, the dichotomy of traditional and modern.”<sup>5</sup> I, therefore, would like to ask them all to avoid the fallacies of either being too conservative or too radical. They need to come to some kind of concession, which should offer and build a fabric acceptable to, and consistent with, everyone in the society. What I have been trying to say here, in order to settle the conflict between the elders and the youth, is to call for a method to bridge this gap.

- (a) A process of selectivity is essential; that the elders evaluate the customs, and carefully select those that will fit in today’s context. Likewise, the wage employees, students, and anyone in the radical sphere, should select,

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<sup>4</sup> Sheldon G. Weeks, *If Education is the Answer, What is the Question?*, Waigani PNG: University of Papua New Guinea, 1976, p. 6, on an imposition of Western formal education, which does away with traditional and cultural values of our society.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

from the modern ideologies and methodologies, those that would best suit our Gilbertese context.

- (b) The selection of modern and traditional values needs to be constructive in the way that these values are incorporated into the educational system. This is particularly relevant at the primary level, where the school is located within the society. For the wider Gilbertese community, seminars, and forums, and any other forms of communication on this issue, should be addressed so that people get acquainted with its truth and importance.

When we acknowledge the giver of all knowledge, then we are also reminded how to use that knowledge. Our knowledge is very much responsible for what we do, say, or think, and, therefore, Jesus reminded us in many ways how we should live with our fellow men and women. One of the great sayings He made was, “Do for others what you want them to do for you” (Matt 7:12 TEV). Our Lord does not expect us to hurt one another, for one cannot wilfully harm oneself unless one is abnormal. He wants us to love, and do good to each other. The apostle Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Colossians, when he talks about the old life and the new. He says, “Everything you do or say, then, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through Him to God the Father (Col 3:17 TEV).

One very important area I feel we should look into is the way in which more and more educated Gilbertese are trying to contrast science with the Christian faith, and saying that science is rational, while religion or faith in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and everything that is associated with them, is irrational. Remember the gap between the elders and the educated, as far as education is concerned, and the advance of scientific knowledge.

I know how my educated Gilbertese friends can be very dangerous to the faith of uneducated Gilbertese on Wagina, whether old, middle-aged, or youth. Some of the educated Gilbertese have been caught up with the modern scientific mentality that if you can't prove something scientifically, then it is not true.

I also know of some high-school students and university students, who, by trying to prove to their uneducated Gilbertese the rationality of science, and its superiority over religion, have tried to explain scientifically how a cloud is formed until it comes back to the earth as rain. Or, they would demonstrate some very simple experiment to explain scientifically why kerosene floats on water, and a few other things they could demonstrate before their people, who did not have the slightest clue why certain things happen, behave, or react, under certain circumstances.

Others may not give direct scientific arguments, but indirectly do so, by raising intellectual questions, which would lead to a scientific explanation. My uncle Tim was a minister among our people at Wagina in the mid-60s. He shared with me how, one day, one of the village men asked him a question during a meal, which they normally had after the morning worship service. He said to uncle:

“Minister, I have a problem. Can you really prove to me that God exists? Have you seen him? I can’t, and this is why I don’t believe in any religion. Unless you prove that the God you worship on Sundays, Wednesday (a communal night service), and on any other time of the day, does exist, I will not come again and waste my time attending worship services, prayer meetings, and any church activities.” My uncle replied:

“Tell me, do you know who your grandfather was?”

“Yes,” the man replied.

“Do you know his name?”

“Yes I do, I saw him when I was a boy.”

The minister continued, “What about your great-grandfather?”

“I did not see him, but I heard of him.”

“But do you believe he once existed?”

“Of course!” the man replied.

“What about your great-great-grandfather, and your great-great-great-great-grandfather. Do you know any of them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe that they once existed?”

“Oh yes! I believe they did live several hundred years ago – that is why I am here with you today, otherwise I wouldn’t have been here.”

The minister said again, “How can you really prove your great-grandparent lived a long time ago, when you did not see any of them?”

The man was quiet, and Tim concluded the discussion, “My friend, who knows, it could be that your great-great-great-grandfather and mine were brothers, and the offspring of Adam, whom God created. You see, that is why I believe in God, even though I could not see him. I believe He made me, my father, and my ancestors, and the very first man to live on this earth.”

Remember, then, that science cannot always prove everything. It has its own areas where its principles are only applicable within itself, but not to other spheres of life. As Christians, we believe that science is God’s gift, and, therefore, it cannot question our beliefs in God, nor should science be looked at as a god, which man may take as above all else. God remains supreme, and above everything else. We need God to comfort us in our times of sorrow and despair, or to help us console those who are disappointed, or sad, or those who need peace, happiness, etc. God alone provides us these and many more, but not science. However, we also acknowledge that God provides for our other needs through the gifts he has given us, but this does not mean that God Himself cannot do or provide beyond what He has provided through His gifts. Take for instance medical science. It is God’s gift to heal the sick, but this does not stop God from healing. He is the give of this gift, and, therefore, He is above that knowledge of healing. There are,

in fact, numerous accounts of God's healings experienced when medical science has failed in healing. This proves God's greatness above all that we know and understand, and, if that is so, then our belief and faith in Him is not in vain, but a meritorious experience.

May I also remind the Gilbertese scientists that "there is no such thing as the scientific method in general".<sup>6</sup> There is a scientific method in physics, psychology, archaeology, and so on, and each has its unique methods and applications. The Christian religion and theology have been the result of intensive study ". . . by means of modern scientific methods in theological faculties (in) universities, and in our theological colleges. It is therefore as 'scientific' in its method as is the study of chemistry or biology today."<sup>7</sup>

This means that religion, or to be more specific, the Christian faith, should not come into conflict with science. They support each other, and are for the good of mankind. To give due respect to science and religion is to give reverence to God, from whom all knowledge derives. He will enlighten and broaden our limited knowledge in all "sciences".

Leaving education aside, I would like us to refer to what we have seen happening with the economic life of the people. The custom of sharing goods was not always possible, as it used to be, and, again, people complained. The general comment was "our custom has been distorted by the modern systems, otherwise we would not have such problems."<sup>8</sup> In relation to this claim, I, for one, feel that many of my people have not been able to relate our culture to their Christian faith. In most cases, it seems that our culture dominates our faith.

Apparently, neither the educated, nor the culturist, Gilbertese was able to interpret the relationship between culture and Christ, or, if some educated have culture, they have not allowed themselves to speak out.

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Richardson, *Science, History, and Faith*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1950, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Research at home. It was the general opinion of the public, particularly the elders.

Let us try briefly to explain what might not have been known about culture and Christ. Culture is the total activity of man, and the total result of that activity. Culture is the artificial and secondary environment, which man imposes on the natural. It is, therefore, something and anything that man creates within his environment. The roads he makes, the garden he clears, plants, and harvests, the songs he sings, the clothes he wears, the government he forms, his education, economics, religion, and we can go on and on. The New Testament binds, or says, one word to cover all these, and that is, "The World". We have also said that none of these things is static. Culture changes because there is always that desire for a better living, whether spiritual, secular, or whatever you might want to call it.

Now, let us see the relation between Christ and culture, or Christianity and civilisation. It has always been a problem from the beginning. Christ's coming into His own culture brought so much change that He was hated, rejected and even killed, as we all know. Let us see some of the examples of conflict and change Jesus brought. He twisted the judicial system, for example, the law said, "stone to death the adulterer", Christ said, "forgive". He offered and taught forgiveness.

God's wisdom was revealed by the old ones, Christ said by the babies. All these which Christ did and taught were challenging to His own culture. He, therefore, was always at the focal point, or centre, of tension or conflict among His own people and followers, who were so used to their culture. Why was Christ doing this? Christ was single-minded, so that His teaching and preaching were directed to God and His Kingdom. He did not teach culture, or come to create a civilisation. He came to transform the world.

Loyalty to culture and loyalty to Christ cannot come in harmony, but, if Christ was born and lived in culture, then there must be a way to harmonise things. The Bible says in Genesis that Adam and Eve were to develop a garden. In other words, God has made man, and given him a culture mandate, because we have said that anything which is man-made, is cultural, therefore, for man to develop the garden means that God cannot oppose culture, but encourages man to develop what He

has created. However, God does not create culture itself, that is man's own work, and also it does not mean that Christ is totally opposed to culture. He is the Lord of any culture. We can say that He is the best of our ancestors, the topmost in culture. Evidence in this belief was when the gospel was first brought. There were some who immediately accepted him. There were those who, for the first time, heard stories about His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and accepted Him as their Lord and God. Today, we see Him as the completion of our culture, the perfection of our culture, the fulfilment of our culture, the One expected of our culture, and the best of ethics in our culture.

Christ experienced in culture does not mean that Christ and culture are identical; they are distinct from each other. Thus, if we want to allow the cultural institutions to come into harmony with Christian belief, then we must see that it does not weaken Christian belief. What I am saying here is that Christ in culture can be synthesised. How? It is man's responsibility to develop and produce good habits and good customs, for example, do not steal, do not kill, etc. However, these are all given by the Supreme Being, God. Over and above these laws, there is a transcendent law from God, for example, believe, have hope, leave your family, sell to the poor, and so forth. These are God's laws or gifts, which we, in culture, do not make or produce. In this sense, God is above culture. Anything of our culture, that is what we have, use, make, do, and so forth, must look beyond, so that they find their complete fullness from the transcendent law, or the giver and provider and maker of all things in this universe.

I am not trying to claim that I understand Christ and culture thoroughly. When we try to understand God and culture, we must always remember that we cannot possibly know and understand fully, because of our sinful nature.

When we submit ourselves to the Lord, listening to His word from the Bible, listening to preachers, and pondering on the messages, observing the lives of those whom He has touched and changed, then we can see another important fact why Christ was in culture, firstly in this physical body, and now through the Holy Spirit. The important fact is that Christ transforms. In Matthew's gospel (5:21-43) we have a

record of Jesus transforming the teaching about the law. Repeatedly, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said. . . . But now I tell you.” St John’s gospel generally gives a picture of Christ transforming culture.

Christ, therefore, lives in culture so that He can transform culture. This is also what we mean when we say that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer. Christ redeems the whole of man. He changes the spirit of man, his inner being, personality, etc. He heals, He comforts, He teaches, etc., thus transforming culture. Why does God do this? The reason is because the law (in the Old Testament) alone cannot eradicate sin, which has been deeply rooted within man. Christ, therefore, needs to live in the midst of culture to transform it. Thus God created the world and did not leave it behind. He is still creating and re-creating within the world, culture, and so forth. He created the world, but later came to live and die, that is transforming.

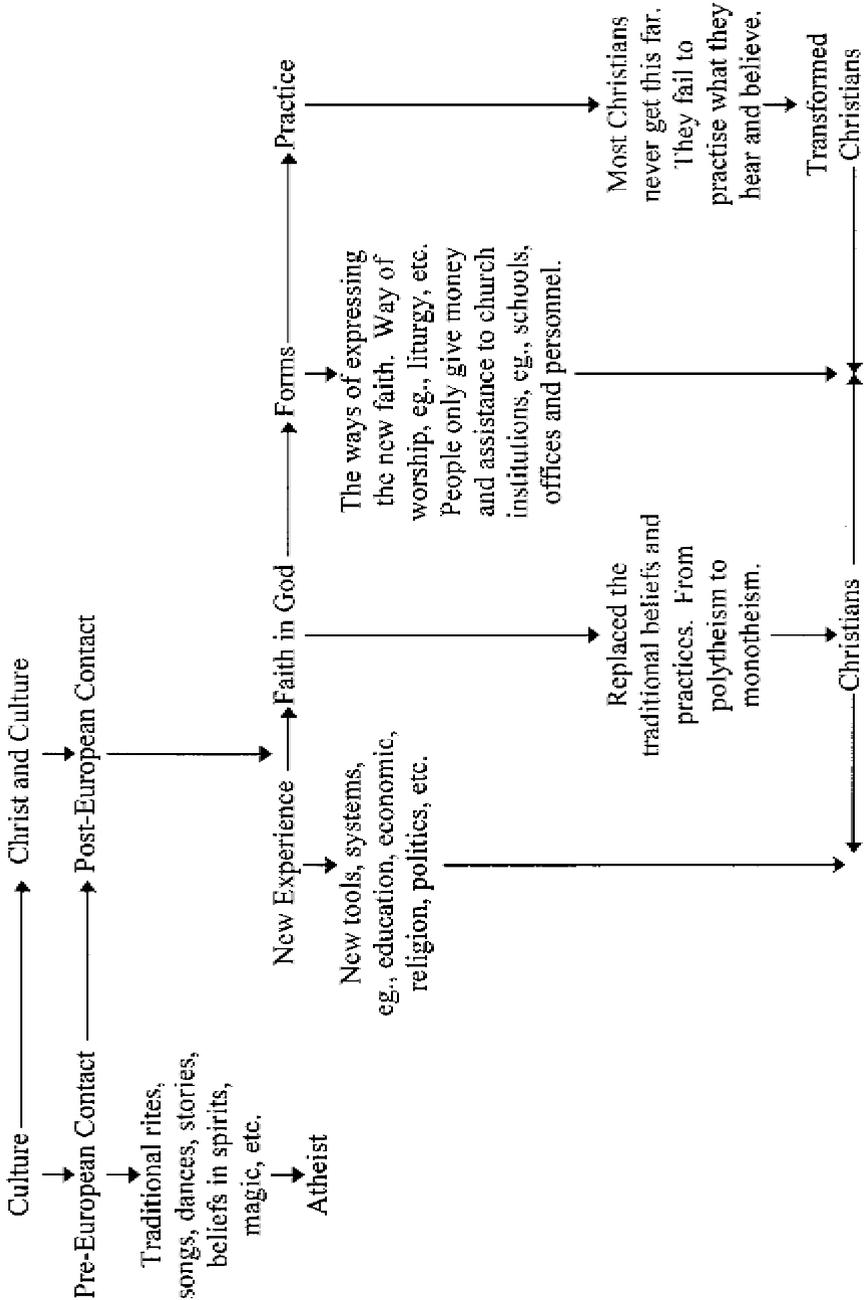
There may be wars, killings, confusions, conflicts, and so on, but evil cannot ultimately win because God is present in the history of man transforming. That is hope in the midst of human problems. Remember, all the world leaders, like Hitler, who have not been able to completely to achieve their selfish ends. God in His power would not let human evil power distort completely His creation, rather history and culture will always be transformed to give glory to the Lord God Almighty.

Do not destroy cultures, traditional and modern, but give Christ, who is the Lord of all culture, the chance to transform them. Any Christian, from any culture, who does not accept transformation from God is not a realistic Christian. God is the one who can transform our lives. Transformation takes place within us in our cultural situation. Just as God used Christ to transform culture, so are we used as agents of God to transform our customs, education, economic system., religious life, and the whole of our culture. Transformation does not take place in heaven or after death, rather it starts here with us. He is the one who can change from within. This is what we call “conversion”, and when conversion takes place, then transformation follows on.

There are values within any culture that could be used for its transformation, but that does not mean that value, by itself, could bring about transformation within its context. Christ, who is the giver, provider, sustainer, and Lord of all spheres of life, is the only means whereby the existing values could be used to bring about transformation. Christ, however, expects us to bring him closer to these areas, which need transformation. When we bring Christ within the different areas of culture, the education system, the economic system, traditional norms, etc., then people can see, and we, too, can see better what is lacking, and then bring about that transformation. Unless a culture is brought under Christ, there is no way that transformation will take place.

When the gospel is preached or presented in church worship, particularly on Sundays, at homes, in family devotions, at fellowship groups, such as youth fellowship groups, men's fellowship groups, women's fellowship groups, bible study groups, and within the different orders, such as, in the Roman Catholic church, it brings about transformation of what is already known, understood, attained, and experienced.

Although we hope for a perfected transformation of every culture taking place in God's appointed time, first this has to be seen and experienced with us here in this world, and at this life. Thanks to God our Father, for He has already subdued the powers of evil. We see this in the coming and ministry of Jesus, where the sick are being dealt with, evil is being dealt with, injustice is being dealt with, the dead are being dealt with, and the immoral are being dealt with. All these show that the Kingdom of God has already come. We can call God's Kingdom the only perfect and completely transformed culture, from which every culture awaits its final and perfect change.



Christ is intolerant. He does not allow anything else to happen except God, and what God expects from us. We shall find this very difficult, as we are unable to live without being part of culture. We saw that Christ had conflict and tension with His culture. We, therefore, will continually be in conflict in our lives for Christ while living within our own culture, because, when Christ comes, or is presented, you would expect a change. He seems rather too drastic and radical.

If we take our minds back, and skim through the history of the Gilbertese in the period between pre-European contact and the post-independence era, we find that there has been so much change affecting both the secular and the spiritual life of the people. What we need now is transformation. Let us see where we began, where change and conflict came in, and where we probably have failed.

As far as the Gilbertese on Wagina are concerned, I see that the current forces are encouraging people to limit their Christian practical life to the church institutions. They would give money or any other form of help to church hospitals, church headquarters, church fellowship groups, or organisations, etc., but not to any other group of people, except for government income tax. Some have already withdrawn from the church to remain by themselves, and continue to look for new experiences. Eventually, they will become atheists like our ancestors, and start all over again.

This cannot be a Christian experience, for someone who has decided to accept and follow Christ never goes back to live the past experiences, but keeps following Christ, which is an onward process of trying to attain the fullness of His stature. This is what Christ meant in following Him, to live for Him, and to be his disciple when he says, "Anyone who starts to plough, and then keeps looking back, is of no use to the Kingdom of God" (Luke 19:62). One may not necessarily return to his or her past, but if his/her heart is in the past, thinking wistfully of the old experiences, then that is not a true Christian experience.

Let us therefore look into other possible ways of helping ourselves. Within the next few decades, there would be no one who has

not received formal education on Wagina, and, therefore, we will have more intellectuals than at present. This means that, if we cannot handle the changes, conflicts, and problems caused by our educated elites at present, we will certainly have more problems in the future. Literacy has made some Gilbertese question the authority of the scriptures, and the tradition of the churches. What do we say to this problem, and how can we defend the authenticity of the Bible, which we claim to be God's word, the Book of Books, and the book of life?

It is my hope that some of my educated friends who have questioned, or are beginning to question, the reliability of the Bible, the book in which the Christian faith is rooted, may come to realise that the Bible really is inspired by the Holy Spirit to make it relevant to our context, even though it was written more than 2,000 years ago. People should not be misled by the clever intellectuals who write and speak convincingly, eroding the foundations of the faith. They (the non-Christians) have not been able to provide substantial grounds on which they are attacking the Christian faith. People need to be firm in their faith. Our ancestors were right in accepting Christianity, and, therefore, we have to follow them, so that we may be able to continue transforming our culture, our knowledge, the way in which we relate to these worldly things, and how we could relate to others we live with or come into contact with anywhere.

### *Economics and Development*

We stated that, in economics, there was exploitation, individualism, materialism, alcoholism, alienation from parents, and the society, etc., because of the present economic system. What then does Christianity have to contribute to these corruptions?

Christ is the key to any freedom. I said "freedom" here, because most of these things can really make people oppressed. During the ten days I spent on Wagina, there were signs that some were getting more and more preoccupied with what the economic system has offered. Self-interest seems to be the prime concern, and faith seems to be secondary. One evening, we also discussed some problems of the economic system. There was heated argument among the villagers because some were very defensive, saying that there was nothing wrong

with the economic system, while others were trying to point out the destruction it brings to society and to the individual. The majority of those who were for the argument were those who were better off in terms of money and material goods. Those who were against the economic system, if we like, we may call the “have nots”. So we can say that each person giving an argument for or against the economic system is only doing it for his/her own defence.

What could be the root of all these problems? I personally feel that the root cause of these problems is “money”.

Let us now look at Jesus’ attitude towards money dealers. We find in the gospels of Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15, and John 2:15, the account of Jesus when he entered the temple and found that people were selling and buying. He was so furious that He chased the people and the animals out with a whip and overturned the tables of the money-changers. Never was Jesus heard to have been so angry as in this situation. Would He have chased the people if they had done something else, or only those who were involved with trading?

We shall now look at another prominent character of the New Testament, Paul. What does Paul say? “For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs” (1 Tim 6:10).

The Christian community is different from any other community. It has to be differentiated from the rest. This can only be so when the Christian completely lives in the way Christ and the Apostles expect us to live. There is a danger when we live a very pious kind of life, because people may call us religious fanatics. But can we completely live in the way Christ and the Apostles expect us to live? The things that can distract us away from Jesus are worldly possessions. The craving for these worldly possessions makes one’s sight grow dim. He or she may not be able to hear the voice of God who, through His Spirit, speaks to us, reminding us what we should and should not do. But when these worldly things have taken control over us, they are like

voices that penetrate so much into our body, mind, and soul that we will not be able to hear, know, and understand the Master's voice.

How, then, can we relate with these worldly goods or possessions? Are we supposed to discard them? No, Christ does not forbid us. Our requirements must be met by God's creation – food, drink, money, clothes, etc. However, they may not be used for accumulation. They are to be used. Remember what happened in the desert to those who wanted more manna (Ex 16:15-21), and what Christ said about possessions in Matt 6:19-20.

We have to depend daily on God, through what He gives and provides, not building our dependence on the things He has created. The moment we depend on these worldly possessions, our discipleship, that is, our call to obey and follow the Lord, is cut off, and dependence on God is broken. But why does God want us to depend on Him daily? The answer is because He wants us to have a daily communication with Him, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:21).

Now, where do we draw the line? How much can we use, possess, or accumulate? How can I relate myself and my worldly possessions with loving God, and be submissive and dependent on Him? It does not depend on how much I earn or save, rather it depends on how I look at my treasure, and the way it prevents me from loving God above all else. My love for God should be foremost in my mind, that no treasure or worldly possessions should prevent me from loving Him with all my heart, mind, and soul. No one can serve two masters: he will be faithful to one, and unfaithful to the other. These worldly things can make us see them as our means of security, but they cannot guarantee our security. God is to be our real security. Note that we have no right to blame God's gifts, such as money, and other forms of wealth, but we must be aware that these have the capacity to draw us away from God. And the moment we draw away from God, then, we will not be called disciples of Christ, for a disciple is someone who follows and obeys the Lord's will. There is no discipleship without following the way and the teaching of the Lord.

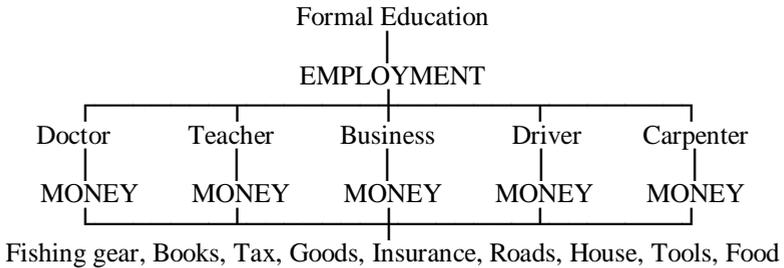
When we recognise God's providence, all His blessings come in as well: "Everything else shall be added unto you." Do not be mistaken and think that we shall receive an increase of income as soon as we recognise and rely on God's providence. I know that some have come to interpret "God's blessings" in terms of money, and other forms of wealth. It does not really matter whether we are rich or poor. What is essential in our discipleship of Jesus Christ is our attitude to worldly possessions. It all depends on the heart of the person. From his/her heart, he/she can know, and people can recognise who he/she really is.

Our discussion on the question of economics among the Gilbertese in the Solomons reflects to us that people not only need better things, such as tools, houses, or better services from trade stores, health clinics, or more money, and other things, but people showed that they wanted development. Apparently their craving for development has caused them all sorts of problems, as we have seen. The main reason, I see here, is because of the wrong concept of development they have. Development is also understood as belonging to the whites, and therefore to develop is to be educated, like the white man, live in the white man's house, that is, with tin-roof houses, eat the white man's food, have plenty of money, own a radio, outboard engine, etc., which are said to have been made by the "white man".<sup>9</sup> That is development as far as the Gilbertese is concerned. The diagram below will probably help us see this concept of development.

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<sup>9</sup> The "white man" here refers to English, Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, including Chinese and Japanese, from whom the Gilbertese assume all imported goods are made and imported.

### Gilbertese Concept of Development



To this kind of development mentality we could say that it is from a purely economic angle. It is synonymous with economic growth, especially Western-oriented. However, while the Gilbertese at Wagina are caught up with the force of economic development, what is the church's understanding of development, which we should present in order to give a fuller meaning and understanding to the people's aspirations for development? We are to help them to see development in a wider perspective – a development that includes the totality of a person. Man/woman needs to develop mentally, physically, and spiritually.

In the creation story we are told:

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so (Gen 1:28-30 RSV).

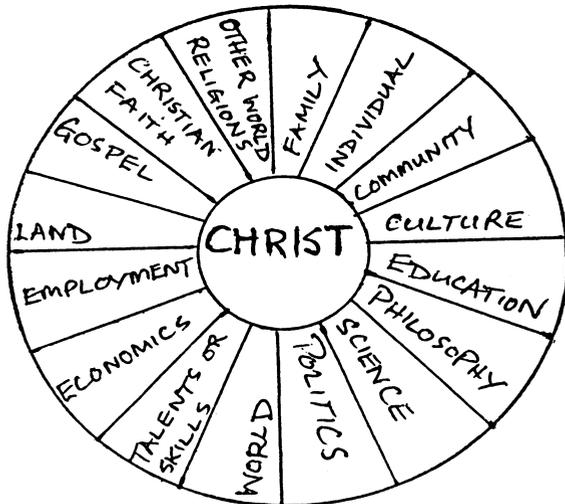
This looks like a total physical development, which God has given man. It includes land, sea, and all that is in them, and even the birds of the air. The New Testament gives us different but interesting

pictures. It tells us of the disadvantages and dangers of development, and also directs us to think of developing spiritual values.

“Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal” (Matt 6:19-20, 19:16; 23 TEV).

The church should direct people to the kind of development which Jesus was talking about when He said, “I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness” (John 10:10 TEV). It seems that nothing good that is related to life is left out. They all have to be developed in such a way that people collectively should enjoy the richness of life.

Everything is interrelated, and all should help, support, and encourage one another to reach their aims in, or to experience, life – life in all its fullness. The diagram below will try to illustrate the wholeness and fullness of life, with Jesus in the centre as the giver of real and true life.



Have we ever thought of relating our development to the other aspects of life, as shown above, plus other areas of life? Do we see them as different and independent, and, therefore, we should not help in their development?

In our economic development, does everyone benefit, or is there an equal distribution of possessions and material goods? Think of the early church, as recorded in Acts. The writer says:

All the believers continued together in close fellowship, and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day, the Lord added to their group those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47 TEV).

In what ways can we relate to and differentiate ourselves from the believers as in Acts? How can we relate ourselves with the government, as far as lands are concerned, so that we could bring about development in the community, and to the nation as a whole? Think of the community, the nation, education, science, and so forth; how much connection do we have with all these areas, which are a part of our existence? We need to raise all these kinds of questions so that we can see how we are developing, what we are developing, for whom we are developing, and how far are we developing, or to what extent are we developing.

Before we move on to our next concern, I would like briefly to point out one area which I feel is more neglected, but which should be the basis upon which everything else is built and developed to its fullness. This is our spiritual development.

Bishop Leslie Boseto, whom I met at Wagina (April 18, 1985), was running a conference, which reflects the wholeness of the gospel for spiritual development. The theme of his conference, which he has

also been conducting in many other Solomon Islands societies, was “The Whole Gospel for the Whole Person and People of the Whole World Through the Whole Church”. In his conclusion of the study, Boseto says:

This concept of the whole gospel for the whole person/people of the whole world through the whole church is to help us to see that God’s concern is the totality of our individual and communal existence. When we talk about total human development we are talking about the concern of the whole gospel for our whole community of the whole world. The church – the Body of Christ – must be an undivided church – the Body of Christ – in order to be a credible witness of the whole gospel through the undivided Body (whole church) of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

I was very pleased that Boseto’s study was presented just at the right time, a few days before I finished interviewing people, and holding discussions with them, when they began to see problems and dangers in education, economics, and religious pluralism. The study should certainly help them to redirect some of their development plans and strategies in order to achieve a more wholesome and holistic view of life. Just as people can become obsessed by the desire for money and worldly possessions, they can also become slaves in regard to their religious affiliations.

### *Mission and Religious Pluralism*

I would like us now to look at the problems of religious pluralism and see what is the best thing we can offer to bring peace and harmony where there is conflict and think of other solutions to problems caused by the presence of religious movements.

It is rather unfortunate that some of our people have turned to non-Christian sources for the fulfilment of their spiritual needs, and, in doing so, conflict, tension, confusion, etc., has arisen between families, communities, and the two Christian churches – the Roman Catholics and the United church. Have the Christian churches on Wagina lost

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie Boseto, 1985.

their power or ability to continue to live and grow together? There is a possibility that our Christian churches have lost, or are slowly losing, their spiritual vitality, which keeps and binds us together in fellowship with our Lord and our fellowman. Thus, instead of attracting those who are spiritually hungry to their spheres of influence, our churches become obstacles, and repel such people.

There are several ways in which we could provide help to our people to defend the faith and hope in us. Looking at the sects and religions that are currently moving from one village to another, from island to island, town to town, from one city to the other, and from one nation or country to another, I know that they (the religious movements) are all missionary movements. We shall therefore examine our missionary role or responsibilities to cope with these non-Christian religious movements.

What is our place as missionaries among today's religious pluralistic movements? Are we to be closed, insulated within ourselves, or are we to be related with them, and open ourselves to them? How far can we be open? We have a mission because we belong to Christ. Those of us (Christians) who have experienced the work of salvation through Christ, have a solid ground to stand on and be prepared for mission. According to Paul, Christian mission is for the whole creation to the secular and sacred, to flesh and spirit. In other words, the mission is for the totality of mankind (Col 1:15-20).

This mission is not an individual thing, but for the whole body of Christ – the church. God does not ask for a solicitor or helper, what He needs is a witness. Simply, someone to witness to His salvation, which He has offered in and through Christ alone. We are not only to look at the Bible as the history and record of God's revelation and salvation. We are not only to look at the (Christian) church, but also to look outside the Bible and the church, because God's salvation act was realised before the Bible was canonised, and the church came into function. This means that our understanding of God's mission is limitless.

If God's mission is limitless, we cannot ignore the truth of its universality. *The mission's universal nature is that He works for the whole world in different ways and religions.*

Seeing them this way, we cannot adopt an attitude of competition and ignorance towards different beliefs or religions. Rather, we need to adopt an attitude of cooperation and sympathy in relation to their influences. We have to recognise that the other person is a person like ourselves. We need to respect him/her, even if he/she belongs to one of the sects or religions different from Christianity. Note that some of these movements do not do away with some of the basic beliefs and understandings we hold, such as belief in one God, the promotion of love, peace, unity, and so forth. However, we need to recognise that some only give emphasis to some particular areas of religious truths. For instance, the Pentecostals, who accepted the gospel, put too much emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the Baha'is emphasise the oneness of religion.

If God's mission is seen working and participating in these other religions and sects, then we have to join forces with such religions. We need not become members of them, rather we must discern and look at them closely in order clearly to distinguish what they believe, teach, and preach. We must see the other person, such as a Baha'i, in an empathetic way. This should be the criterion by which we could be missionaries to these religions and sects.

Remember that God is working in all areas of life – culture, politics, economics, education, religion, and so forth, not only in the United church or the Roman Catholic church.

There are dangers, and, therefore, we should be very careful with our method of approach. One thing we must possess is “empathy”, and then, with discernment, we could be missionaries to other religions and sects.

The missionary task, as presented by Luke, is to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to recover sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to announce that the time has come

when the Lord will save His people (Luke 4:18-21). Luke also reminds us that it is possible to be spectators only and not to be involved in the actual witnessing (Luke 8:19). In this case, we have to be very careful, too, or else we become judges, or military men, instead of missionaries. Luke 4:18ff reminds us that we cannot fix Christ with a series of events and say “that is Christ”, or “there is Christ”. Christ is the *logos*, the Word. He is before Abraham was.

Our commitment and loyalty to Christ, and understanding of his Kingdom, together with our pledge of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, are basic to our way of approach to other religions. Apparently, the church has no mission. It is God’s mission, in which we are only co-workers, we are no more than fellow-workers. The Trinity is involved in this mission because God creates the world, then sends his Son, who offers and makes redemption available. Through the Son, everyone now shares the Sonship of God. The Son is also a sender, reflecting that missionary activity. He sends the 12 disciples to preach and make disciples (see Luke 10:1-20 and Mark 6:7-13).

However, there is no mission for the 12 without the experience of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 13:1-2). The Holy Spirit consecrates, anoints, and sends like the Father and the Son, therefore, there is no mission unless the Holy Spirit sends. One has to have that inspiration in order to be bold in his/her witness as a missionary. He (the Holy Spirit) helps to explain things about Christ’s salvation, God’s purpose for each individual, and God’s love for the whole world.

For Gilbertese, Christians firstly need to be sure of their salvation, and, secondly, to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their life. If these did not take place, then they are either afraid to share their faith, or not so sure what to say when members of other sects or religions approach them. A good witness is someone who is sure he or she has submitted his or her life to Jesus as Lord, who will give and provide him or her the power and the helper through the Holy Spirit (John 16:7 TEV).

For the Gilbertese, this is only the beginning of a further and wider contact yet to come with other religions of the world. Keep in

mind that you (Gilbertese) shall meet people who hold that their beliefs are correct, who probably think they are better than the Catholic or the United churches' beliefs and practices. We need to be reminded of Peter's words:

But in your hearts *revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence, and keep your conscience clear*, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:15-16 RSV).<sup>11</sup>

Let the words of Peter be the cornerstone of our mission, dialogue, encounter, witness, and evangelism to these different religions. Just as Christ was central in encountering the other forces, He is also to be seen as the only example of a mediator between his church and the other religions. Let us believe in God's Word and act upon His promises. "The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen (us) and keep (us) from the evil one" (2 Thess 3:3). It is the evil one who tries to create as many divisions as there can be. Our aim is not to defend the faith to show how good and perfect we are, but, to defend the Christian faith, is to defend the Christian faith from being divided into many sects".<sup>12</sup>

May this concern about the corruption of the Christian faith caused by the forces of this world be one of the Christian's priorities to pursue a study that will probe into their corruptive nature, so that an ever ready, dynamic, and inspiring defence will meet the needs of our people today. We need to elucidate the people's concept about these existing forces so that harmony and peace are experienced within their cultures, and to stimulate and renew their obscured and tainted faith experiences to a deeper level of Christian commitment and witness.

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<sup>11</sup> Note the emphasised words are the key words to anyone who calls us to account for the belief and hope that we have.

<sup>12</sup> Discussion with Leslie Boseto, Wagina, April 18, 1985.

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