

THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES SAGA IN MELANESIA

Some Historical Background

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As the Mandated Territories of Papua and New Guinea groped their way towards self-government, and eventual independence, in the early 1960s, it began to dawn on both the Administration and the churches that education standards were woefully inadequate.¹ Far-sighted people could already see that the need was going to be particularly urgent in the field of higher education, which did not then exist in the Territory. In a submission to the Honourable Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, in December, 1962, the National Missionary Council of Australia (NMCA) drew the Administration’s attention to the discrepancy between the number of pupils in schools run by the missions (170,120) and the Administration (20,396), and to the role of the churches in laying the foundations for academic standards in higher education. But the submission is mainly concerned with the religious and moral content of such education, and it proposes that the future university should include “halls of residence”, on the model of British and Australian university colleges, to be run by the churches on a co-operative basis, in conjunction with a “faculty for religious studies”, which would not only serve the churches’ needs, but would open up the study of religion to any student. It was anticipated that courses would be offered in Biblical Literature,

¹ A memorandum, with neither date nor author’s name, but probably stemming from London Missionary Society circles about the time of the emergence of the Papua Ekalesia in 1962, and in preparation for the Study Conference of the Continuation Committee of the Samoa Conference in Lae, 1963, highlights “accelerated political development”, and mounting pressure from the more-aggressive post-war missions, as the Administration assumed more of the responsibility the churches had previously borne for education. It stresses co-operation among the churches, and training and research as the key needs of the future.

Semitic Studies, Comparative Religion, Theology, Christian Ethics, and History of the Christian Religion.²

In this paper, I should like to reconstruct, from documents in the archives of the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC), the struggle to establish, first a faculty of theology, and, when that failed, lectureships in religious studies at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), drawing out the implications of these largely-fruitless efforts for the present deplorable state of higher religious education in Melanesia.

1. The Losing Battle for Theology at UPNG (1962-1972)

In the early 1960s, there were several initiatives to bring the various mission bodies and churches closer together, in order to present a united Christian front to the Administration.³ The “Christian Council of Papua and New Guinea”, meeting at Kwato Mission, October 12, 1962, resolved:

That this meeting is of the opinion that the one Theological College proposed at Suva would not meet the needs of the whole South Pacific area, but that a College will be needed at Port Moresby also.⁴

Meanwhile, the “New Guinea Continuation Committee of the Samoa Conference” (NGCC), inspired by a Pacific-wide mission conference held in Western Samoa in 1961 under WCC auspices, met at the Lutheran Mission, Lae, October 5-6, 1962. Its secretary, Dr Ian Maddocks, of the Papuan Medical College, reported on the recommendations of the National Missionary Council of Australia, but the meeting went beyond these to resolve:

² A report compiled by Revd Frank Engel, NMCA secretary, summarises a discussion on “The Churches and Education in Papua New Guinea”, July 15, 1963, emphasising that “A partnership between church and state has existed actively since 1945.”

³ These initiatives eventually culminated in the founding of MCC in 1965; see John D’Arcy May, “Whatever Happened to the Melanesian Council of Churches? A Study in Ecumenical Organisation”, *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 1 (1985), pp. 139-157, esp. pp. 139-142.

⁴ At a meeting in Suva, Fiji, September 10-15, 1962, detailed plans had been drawn up for a “United Theological College in the South Pacific”, which became the present Pacific Theological College.

There should be a Faculty of Theology in any and all of the universities of Papua New Guinea, and this must remain our ultimate aim.⁵

The Revd Frank Engel, general secretary of NMCA, accepted this, but reminded Maddocks that the “establishment of a united hall (or halls) of residence” remained a priority.⁶ In a letter accompanying copies of the NMCA recommendations to the Minister for Territories, Engel expressed the hope that all concerned would “appreciate the need for speed in view of the pressure under which things are moving in the Territory”.⁷

This sense of urgency led Maddocks and Engel to meet and correspond tirelessly with church leaders and members of the Interim Council of the future university over the next few years. Towards the end of 1966, Engel was still proposing to Maddocks: “The immediate and crucial matter is getting theological studies established in the University itself, even in the limited way proposed, so that it is in there from the start, and can grow with the University”.⁸ How right he was! But the same letter contains ominous signs that the task had become more difficult in the intervening years: “I am disturbed to hear rumours that the churches have gone cold on a Department of Religious Studies”. As a preface to “Proposals for Higher Religious Education in the Territory University”, circulated about this time, to rally the churches in the face of this growing indifference, the Currie Report on higher education is cited”

The Commission . . . would be anxious to give the religious approach its due place; but it feels unable to put forward any very definite recommendations on the subject, primarily because it has not received from the Christian Missions any really clear consensus of opinion – except in very general ethical terms – of what is needed. (6.54)

. . . there should certainly be some place for religious, specifically Christian, studies in the university; but that place cannot well be

⁵ The NGCC had received detailed reports on theological education from all over the Pacific, stemming from a consultation held in Suva, May 7-13, 1961.

⁶ Engel to Maddocks, November 1, 1962.

⁷ Engel, circular letter, December 17, 1962.

⁸ Engel to Maddocks, October 12, 1966.

determined until the Missions have worked out more precisely what their real desiderata are. (6.71)⁹

In a letter to Maddocks, Prof. P. H. Karmel, chairman of the university's Interim Council, warned discreetly:

There are a number of important issues to be resolved in relation to the academic teaching of religion, and it seems preferable to examine these further before a Board of Religious Studies is established. If the Board were established before these issues are resolved, there could be certain difficulties.¹⁰

Circulating this to his colleagues, on what had, by now, become the "Inter-church Committee for Liaison with the University" (ICCLU), Maddocks commented:

I may be unduly sensitive on this point, but I feel that deeper than the purely academic antagonism to Religious Studies, there was, for some members of the Council, the feeling that one of the tasks of a University in Papua and New Guinea is to redress the over-emphasis on religion which has been going on now in New Guinea for so long.

At a meeting of the ICCLU, June 11, 1966, "The reluctance of the Interim Council to discuss the matter of religious studies was noted" and discussed. Those concerned were beginning to realise that there was a

⁹ A hand-written note at the foot of a page of this document, probably by Maddocks, reports Engel as suggesting that the churches initially propose religious subjects as part of the Arts course; "Indicate that *later* will ask for a degree course. Don't frighten them – if all the students are theology students they'll scare." This advice undercuts the proclaimed intention of going all-out for a theology faculty, and was, perhaps, a fatal hesitation at a decisive moment. In an undated response to the "Proposals", the then Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea/Lutheran Mission stated: "We would not be opposed to the establishment of a Department of Theology within the University if the other churches and missions in the Territories of Papua and New Guinea desire such a department. However, we believe that such a Department of Theology would not take care of our responsibilities to supply higher theological training within ELCONG." The Lutherans declared themselves ready to co-operate in providing a lecturer for a Department of Religion, and tutors for Residential Colleges.

¹⁰ Karmel to Maddocks, February 21, 1966.

certain lack of enthusiasm, possibly on both sides, because of doubts about whether religious studies was a respectable academic discipline.

Engel had anticipated these doubts, and he was doing his utmost to dispel them. He was in touch with those, especially the Revd Davis McCaughey, Master of Ormond College in the University of Melbourne, who were exploring the possibility of setting up departments of theology at Melbourne and Monash Universities,¹¹ but, while welcoming this new development on the traditionally secularist Australian scene, he warned that “it is quite unwarranted to erect, within the Territory, a university which is ‘Australian’, rather than one which is built into the ancient and modern history and traditions of the peoples of New Guinea”. In the same letter, he makes the important point that “the secular nature of a modern university” implies “secularity of control”, not manipulation of the curriculum in such a way as to exclude the study of religion.¹² Responding to the minutes of the inaugural meeting of MCC, June 23-24, 1965, he declares himself “a little worried that the proposal for an Institute of Higher Theological Education seems to be an alternative to the Department of Religious Studies. . . . I hope you think very carefully about this.”¹³ Here, too, there was much wisdom in his warnings.

After holding consultations in Rabaul, Madang, and Port Moresby in 1965, which involved members of the Australian Council of Churches, the Melanesian Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic church, and the Evangelical Alliance,¹⁴ the ICCLU finally proposed the setting up of a Board of Religious Affairs and Education for the University, on which “all Christian missions and churches should be represented, either directly or indirectly”. Somewhat surprisingly, in the light of previous discussions, the churches agreed “that we do not wish to establish or run Residential Colleges, either denominationally or together”, but “In

¹¹ Letters from McCaughey to the Vice-Chancellor of Monash, November 15, 1965, and to Maddocks, January 31, 1966, and a proposal for a Department of Theology in the University of Melbourne, dated 1959, are extant.

¹² Engel to Maddocks, May 5, 1966.

¹³ Engel to Maddocks, October 12, 1966.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the Unevangelised Fields Mission, the Churches of Christ Mission, the Baptist Union, and Christian Mission in Many Lands gave their assent to these proposals. In his letter of April 23, 1987, granting permission to publish his memorandum (section no. 16), Frank Engel wrote: “I have rarely, if ever, experienced a meeting that moved so smoothly and rapidly and harmoniously.”

anticipation of degree courses beginning in 1967, we urge the establishment of a Department of Religious Studies in that year. We recognise a difference between training for the ministry and university theological training. We do not expect the University to train our clergy”; rather, religious subjects should be offered to the general student.¹⁵ In support of this, but going considerably beyond it, Engel sent detailed and cogently-argued submissions on the practicality and academic necessity of including the study of theology and religion in the new university, right from the start.¹⁶ In his accompanying letter to the ICCLU, however, Engel warned that some members of the Interim Council “would sooner avoid the issue, and so be free to spend the money on something else”,¹⁷ and this is indeed what happened: departments of political science and philosophy were given preference.¹⁸

What finally emerged from all these efforts was even more discouraging. There was to be no United Theological Institute or Faculty of Theology, no Department of Religious Studies, no church-run Residential College, not even a university chapel; and the eventual solution has proved as unviable as most of these would have been.

2. The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at UPNG (1972-1987)

A minute from the Vice-Chancellor of the newly-created University of Papua New Guinea, Dr John Gunther, to the Interim Council, communicated to Maddocks in March, 1967, mentions his discussions with Dr Charles Forman of Yale University on the subject of religious education in the Pacific. From these, it is already clear that what the university was really thinking of was the appointment of a lecturer in religious studies to an appropriate department, such as philosophy or social anthropology. Both Maddocks and Fr Pat Murphy SVD, President of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, founded in 1969,

¹⁵ Memorandum, Port Moresby, February 5, 1966.

¹⁶ Frank G. Engel, “A Case for a Department of Religious Studies in the University of Papua New Guinea”, an historical document, which still deserves close study and is, therefore, published for the first time in this issue of *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, pp. 22-41; see also “A Practical Consideration Relating to the Establishment of a Department of Religious Studies in the University of Papua New Guinea” by Engel, and a document with neither name nor date, probably a year or two earlier, entitled “The Missions and a Papua New Guinea University”.

¹⁷ Engel to ICCLU, October 12, 1966.

¹⁸ Dr John Gunther, Vice-Chancellor of UPNG, to Maddocks, March 31, 1967.

had carried on a lengthy correspondence with the Theological Education Fund of WCC, and this, too, tended more and more in the direction of funding lectureships rather than founding institutions. Dr Shoki Coe had represented TEF at a meeting of the “Interim Council of the Union Theological Institute” (one of several metamorphoses of ICCLU), May 11, 1970, at which he stated that “TEF is prepared to act as a catalyst in getting the project going”.¹⁹ This was taken to mean that TEF was prepared to commit funds, which was confirmed at a subsequent meeting with Dr James Bergquist, director of TEF, in 1972. In notes on a conversation he had with Dr Bergquist the next day, February 27, 1972, Patrick Murphy sums up: “The shift away from the Union Theological Institute to lectureships does away with the need to create a new centre, with new buildings, involving capital costs. . . . It is recognised that there are certain risks involved, and that there is a call for faith in the face of a now-or-never opportunity”. In other words: the lectureships were a last-ditch stand to save a deteriorating situation.

Looked at from another point of view, however, that of the university in its secular setting, “the two lectureships were the first to be established in any Australasian university, an important development, partly affecting the subsequent situation in the south”.²⁰ In 1970, Dr Vincent Van Nuffell became lecturer in comparative religion with the department of anthropology. In 1972, the two lecturers funded by TEF and the local churches, Dr Garry Trompf and Dr Carl Loeliger, joined the history department to lecture in religious studies. By the end of 1973, the three lecturers were able to report considerable progress, their courses having attracted students, modest in numbers, but outstanding in ability.²¹ Van Nuffell’s courses on world religions proved least attractive to Papua

¹⁹ Quoted by Bishop David Hand at a later meeting of the “Inter-Church Committee for Religious Studies within UPNG” (yet another metamorphosis of ICCLU!), February 26, 1972, with Dr James Bergquist, Director of TEF. Frank Engel writes (April 23, 1987) that he was instrumental in arranging for Dr Charles Forman of Yale, and Dr Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary New York, to speak to Dr Gunther about religious studies in 1967.

²⁰ Report by Garry W. Trompf on “The Condition of Religious Studies at the University of Papua New Guinea”, 1985.

²¹ Some of the names of students listed for these courses are of interest, in the light of later developments: Pedi Anis, William ToKilala, Joshua Daimoi, Wellington Jojoga, Utula Samana; in his report, Trompf mentions many more, and lists their publications.

New Guinea students.²² But when the contracts of Trompf and Loeliger came up for renewal at the end of 1974, the “Churches’ Council for University Religious Studies” (as ICCLU had, by then, become) expressed great satisfaction with the way they had adapted their courses to the needs of their Papua New Guinean students, and urged continuation of the lectureships, with Trompf’s to be funded internally by the university, and Loeliger’s by the churches.²³ This is, in fact, what happened; and Trompf and Loeliger went on to become two of the most-noted authorities on Melanesian religion, and its relation to Christianity.

When Trompf left in 1977, followed by Loeliger in 1982, though both returned for shorter period to “hold the fort”, Trompf as Professor of History in 1983-1985, and Loeliger in 1984, the localisation of their positions by John Kadiba and John Waiko proved to be only temporary.²⁴ In the meantime, the basis for having religious studies taught at UPNG, and at Goroka Teachers’ College, was undermined by two circulars from the government Department of Education in 1976. The one concerning primary education did not mention religious instruction, and the one on secondary schools stated laconically: “religious studies is deleted”.²⁵ This contravened both the 1967 Agreed Syllabus and the 1970 Education Ordinance, and the ensuing outcry led to submissions by the churches, a motion introduced into parliament by Mr Martin ToVadek on 23 November 1976, and meetings of the Churches’ Education Council with the secretary of the Education Department, Mr A. Tololo.²⁶ But the incident was symptomatic of an attitude prejudicial towards the teaching of religion in government institutions, and, within the university, this led to religious studies’ having to be constantly on the defensive, “because European academics, with a personal antipathy toward religion, are prone to use it as a ‘spittle pit’”, in Trompf’s characteristically colourful phrase.

²² Van Nuffell is said to have lectured on subjects such as Egyptian religion “without reference to the situation in PNG” (Fr Kees vander Geest SVD, commenting on a Memorandum on Tertiary Religious Education in PNG, August 17, 1986). This did not go down well with the Melanesian students, and perhaps helps to explain the churches’ reservations about “comparative religion”.

²³ Aide-memoire, April 20, 1974, under the name of Fr Pat Murphy SVD, as Secretary of CCURS.

²⁴ Further details of these moves will be found in Trompf, “The Condition”.

²⁵ Reported in a history paper by Peter Bolger, “Who Will Control Religious Education in Papua New Guinea?”, October 1977, p. 6.

²⁶ Cf. Bolger, “Who Will Control”, pp. 7-8.

He goes on: “The discipline’s teachers have been branded ‘missionaries’, even though they have preserved the highest canons of social scientific analysis, and adopt the historical and phenomenological approach to materials.”²⁷

This insistence on scientific standards, however, draws criticism of a different kind from representatives of the churches:

Has the Religious Studies section of UPNG been pushed into a narrow historical and phenomenological refuge by what Paul Ricoeur calls the terrorism of the positivists? If, contrary to what is the case in great universities all over the world, there is no adequate place for theology in the university of this country, then that university has become the hostage of narrow-minded academics, who are insensitive to the profound religious and Christian concerns of the large majority of Papua New Guineans. . . . Again, the question must be asked whether too high a price has been paid for being in the university at all. . . . The narrowing of its field of interest by abandoning proper theological work, and the limiting of its audience to foundation courses (apart from those who take on RS as a subject).²⁸

These pointed comments shed a clear light on the dilemma facing us today, but, in a rather disconcerting way, they also bring us full circle to the debates on the churches’ proper role in education, which characterised the early 1960s. At an ICCLU meeting held at St Joseph’s School, Boroko, June 11, 1966, a Mr Dunstone saw the task as “to train people for the logical and proper teaching of religion”, and he averred “that if the university decided that the best man for such a position was an atheist, we must be prepared to accept an atheist”. He was answered by a Mr Brewer, who said: “As the old New Guinea order crumbles, theological questions are going to come up. Only the university offers a place to sort them out, and offers a chance to give some theological lead

²⁷ Trompf, “The Condition”, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ Dr Jan Snijders SM, then Dean of Studies, and lecturer in philosophy at Holy Spirit Seminary, in a comment on Trompf’s report presented to MCC, December 10, 1985, p. 2. He sums up: “The RS section could not develop into a sort of graduate school for theologians unless it becomes frankly theological. In which case, it would acquire an entirely new attraction for the churches.”

to a new society. If the university bows out of this, it leaves the field open to warring sects.” Both positions are as true today as they were then. But how can they be reconciled?

3. Theology or Religious Studies: What Do We Want?

We must begin by questioning the “or” in the heading of this section, for nothing is so unfruitful as false dichotomies, which lead us astray by suggesting contradictions that are only apparent. It is easy to make the “subjective”, “committed” study of the religious tradition one was brought up in, or to which one has converted, appear incompatible with the “objective”, “neutral” study of other people’s traditions, and the assumption that this must be so has played a disproportionate role in the debates we have just surveyed. In Melanesia, the alleged opposition between theology and religious studies has been reinforced by the conviction, instilled in many Melanesians, whether educated or not, by missionaries and theology lecturers, whether intentionally or not: that you can be either Melanesian **or** Christian, but not both.²⁹

Both “doing theology” and “studying religion” can, and should, be done ecumenically, using dialogue, not as a missionary method, or a spare-time activity, but as a technique for understanding both oneself and others. Every religious tradition develops its own techniques of self-interpretation and identity-maintenance, and dialogue must shift from the level of mere comparison and exchange of information to this more self-reflective level, which Christians would call “theological”, and which more generally would be called “hermeneutical”. In the case of societies based on tribal kinship patterns, such as those of Melanesia, “religion” is not immediately differentiated from “culture”, so those coming from other contexts in which religion is institutionalised, and relies on literatures and systems of abstract thought, must develop further techniques for interpreting myth and ritual as media of consensus-formation and religious expression.³⁰ To think of “world religions” as autonomous entities, and of “Christianity”, or “the gospel”, as superior to all others,

²⁹ This was emphasised by a theology lecturer of many years’ experience in PNG, Dr John Strelan, formerly of Martin Luther Seminary, in a recent letter to the author, October 16, 1986.

³⁰ Some of the issues involved in doing this are discussed by John D’Arcy May, “Consensus in Religion: An Essay in Fundamental Ecumenics”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980), pp. 407-431.

because absolute, with regard to history, and uncontaminated by cultures, is a serious distortion of both theology and the study of religion.³¹

Frank Engel's memorandum of 1966 may be dated in some respects, but basically he was right: there can be no possible objection, whether in principle, or by precedent, to theology – so long as it is truly ecumenical in the sense outlined above – taking its place alongside other subjects in the “secular” university; indeed, where this is the case, it is to the mutual benefit of the university, the churches, and society.³² It is a matter of priorities and values – and of the will to implement them. The religious studies saga in Melanesia is, thus, not merely a dispute over formalities among a few academics and church people, but a symptom of the way the newly-independent nations of this part of the Pacific are developing.

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³¹ Cf. John D'Arcy May, “Essence – Identity – Liberation: Three Ways of Looking at Christianity”, *Religious Traditions* 6 (1984), pp. 30-41, and the sensitive treatment of the methodological issued by Robert B. Crotty, *Religious Studies in a Tertiary Secular Institution*, Occasional Paper No. 12, Salisbury SA: Salisbury College of Advanced Education, March 1976.

³² There are, of course, genuine differences between the roles of the seminaries and the university in religious education, and they are conveniently summarised in a communication from MATS dated 1972: 1. The academic vs. the situational approach to theology; 2. The Western vs. the third-world setting for advanced studies; 3. Degree- vs. non-degree-oriented study. The pastoral training of ministers or priests does not make the same demands on academic prowess as the professional study of theology and religion. A useful discussion of these issues will be found in the proceedings of a MATS-TEF consultation: James A. Bergquist, “Theological education in ferment and change: the crisis in third-world theological education”, in *Theological Education in Melanesia Today, Point* (1/1976), pp. 5-15.

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