

NOTES TOWARDS THE CHRISTIANISING OF CULTURES IN MELANESIA

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I came to Papua New Guinea 18 years ago. This year is my tenth teaching here at Holy Spirit Seminary. Looking back now, I am struck by two dominating features. The first is the rapid pace of change in both the secular and religious aspects of life in Papua New Guinea. One consequence of these changes has been social instability, as outside forces have altered or manipulated the customs and traditions of Papua New Guineans. Another major insight has been formulated already by Dr Reiner Jaspers, MSC, in a paper entitled: "A Brief History of the Catholic church in PNG". Dr Jaspers concluded with these words:

The Catholic church contributes, in a spirit of cooperation and ecumenism, in an essential manner to the development of the material, intellectual, and spiritual life of the people. However, the Catholic church has still to find her Melanesian identity.

The title of this lecture, "Notes Towards the Christianising of Cultures within Melanesia", ought to alert everyone to the provisional nature of what is offered, and yet allows me to incorporate the two previously-mentioned observations, viz., changes in Melanesian cultures, and the Christian dimension of Melanesian cultures.

I begin by explaining two terms: "Culture" and "Secularisation". Then I will signpost where I believe future priests can direct the extensions, commitment, and vitality of the many disciples of Christ in Melanesia. Finally, I conclude this lecture by offering some general principles, which need to be understood, appreciated, and lived, if ever a life-style, or ethos, which is both thoroughly Christian, and thoroughly Melanesian, is to develop in Papua New Guinea.

The word "culture" has been, and still is, the subject of much debate among specialists, and there exists a bewildering variety of definitions. I don't

wish to get bogged down in this issue, and hence will use the word “culture” in a wide sense to mean *all socially-learned aspects of human life*. Such a manufactured definition of culture is so broad that it makes it easier to say what is not cultural. Thus, certain physical functions, such as digestion and breathing are not cultural, because they are not learned. Also, certain learned things are not cultural, because the learning is not social. Thus, one can learn, just from personal experience, without any social context, that hot objects, when touched, cause pain. Even so, my definition of culture, i.e., all social-learned aspects of human life, covers a vast area. Thus, culture, in this wide sense, included the family, the tribe, the state, the school, as also our stores, our banks, our hospitals – in fact, all of the institutions, which structure our behaviour. Such a definition of culture includes technology, sciences, philosophy, and intellectual pursuits generally, emotional reactions, physical skills, habits of work and recreation, behaviour towards strangers, towards elders, towards children. Such a definition includes language itself, which not only provides a means of communication, but shapes the concepts by which we think. Thus, according to our definition, culture does not only influence external behaviour. Culture also shapes thoughts, emotions, and attitudes.

I believe that it is impossible to make moral judgments, apart from one’s social milieu. It’s true that a person may think of himself as a rebel, making moral judgments in the face of opposition by a hostile society, but the knowledge and attitudes underlying those judgments have already been profoundly shaped by some society. Therefore, it is not a question of whether we should be influenced by society in our moral judgments – the fact is, we are so influenced. On that point, we have no choice. The real question is how may we, as Christians, use the resources of society to enable us to make correct moral judgments as committed Christians?

To further complicate matters, there is the growing phenomenon of secularisation within Papua New Guinea, which is definitely influencing Melanesian cultures, and perplexing many Christians. Secularised people have learnt to live various parts of their lives, more or less, without reference to religion. Economic life, medicine, science, drama, sport, and other activities are carried on, according to their own rules and mooring, with little or no reference to Christianity. Secularised society does not forbid a person to be religious. However, it tends to push religion into a, more or less, private area of life, so that the public milieu has little religious reference. When the Christian churches attempt to make any religiously-based position a factor in politics,

most people see it as an illegitimate mixing of politics and religion, an improper breaking down of the compartments which isolate religion from the public milieu.

In theory, secularisation is religiously neutral. Secularisation allows people to have their own religious beliefs, and it imposes none. In fact, however, the effect of secularisation is not religiously neutral. Religion held only as a private matter begins to seem strange and irrelevant to the public world, the market place, the government, and to the schools. Eventually, such a privatised religion comes to seem strange, even to Christians, if they have been formed predominantly by a public milieu, which has no place for religion.

Now, this presents a problem. A Christian may attend a service on Sunday, pray for a few minutes each day, and, perhaps, do a few minutes of scripture reading each week. However, if for most of his waking hours, a Christian is subjected to ideas about success, about happiness, about the good life – as presented merely by advertising, and fostered by business practice, or the entertainment industry, and which are far from Christian – what will be the result? Sadly, a Christian formed by such a public milieu will experience many Christian moral norms, as opposing some of his own perceptions and attitudes. Such a Christian ends up resenting these Christian norms, and becomes impatient with a church, which fails to update its moral teaching, so as to be in tune with the modern world.

Can one live in, and be continuously subject to, a non-Christian milieu, while maintaining a lively appreciation for all Christian moral norms? Some exceptional people may be able to do so. For the rest of us, it would be extremely difficult.

Faced with this problem, what is to be done? Well, first we need direction, and so, I offer for your assessment, a series of *signposts*.

The first signpost is labelled *The Common Good*. I have argued, elsewhere, that the major principle, operative in most PNG societies, is a group ethic: what is good for the group (line, village, or tribe) is right. The situation, where one group of people can threaten to destroy a Post and Telegraph repeater station, can threaten to burn down a teachers' training college, or can set up road-blocks on national highways, and charge motorists – because compensation has not been paid for the ground – illustrates this mode of

thinking and acting. It matters not that the nation needs efficient means of communication or institutions to train teachers. It matters not that the ground in question was originally a swamp, or is an inaccessible mountain top; if the group, who traditionally owned the ground, does not immediately benefit, then, they believe, they are entitled to obstruct, to pillage, or to destroy. The common good consists in those goods and values, by means of which, a society is to help its members in the realisation of tasks which, they alone, cannot sufficiently achieve. The functions of the common good are basically two. Firstly, the common good promotes, and makes possible, an integral human existence for its members. The second function of the common good is to preclude anti-social impulses in human nature from interfering with the rights of others, and with a just social order.

This is not the place for a lecture on the common good. However, in Catholic moral theology, we have a long and rich tradition, explaining and developing this concept of the common good.

It is our task, as Christian leaders, to teach people that the group ethic has to be both deepened and widened. The ethical basis for Christian living is both personal and universal love. Thus, the goods and values that go to make up the common good, need to be actualised in each person, and extended to all persons, irrespective of race, colour, or creed. When people of a culture are convinced, and live according to the norms of the common good, then a truly Christian value system emerges.

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The second signpost is labelled *The Dignity of Women*. In August, 1977, Mrs Nahau Rooney became the first woman in PNG to hold cabinet rank in a national government. In 1978, the Prime Minister of PNG, responding to pressure, exerted by a number of educated women, created a section for women's affairs within his own department. One of the avowed aims of this section (which is now a full division within the office of Home Affairs and Youth) was to monitor all laws in the country, so as to ensure equal rights for all women under the law. These developments, and there are many others, while important, are not a realistic indication of prevailing attitudes and practices throughout the country. The horrific number of reported rapes, the frightful regularity of cases of wife bashing, the growing need for assistance to deserted wives, the difficulties which educated national women must overcome

in order to be able to win acceptance/recognition (at times even within the institutional structure of the church), these, and many other instances of discrimination and disrespect of women, militate against a truly Christian flavour to life here in Papua New Guinea.

We, as Catholics, have been able, in the past, and now must continue our efforts, to awaken, in all people, an awareness and appreciation of the role of women, and their inherent dignity. Men and women, together, form one humanity. The role we accord Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in our prayer and acts of formal worship, plus the inspiring encyclicals on Mariology, penned by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II: these treasures from our Catholic heritage can, when preached and practised, imbue in all a deep respect for all women. True Christian discipleship implies recognition of the reciprocal, and complementary role, of our sisters in Christ.

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The third signpost is labelled *Family Life*. Very few priests have studied or evaluated the theological changes concerning marriages, as contained in the Second Vatican Council's document *Gaudium et Spes*. It is relatively easy to stress what is incompatible with Christian teaching, e.g., divorce, abortion, adultery, and other forms of unfaithfulness. It is more difficult to speak about the hopes and aspirations of men and women, who are trying to live their lives in a fully human way, and yet are confused and frightened. There is, in Papua New Guinea a common link between Catholics and everyone of good will. It is the hope that, within marriage and family life, men and women will develop a community, which will help them produce authentic love in their lives.

All too often, the ecclesiastical ceremony has been the beginning and end of the church's involvement with the married. But the church, and her ministers, cannot remain apart from the unfolding of a couple's inner married life. The family is a domestic church, where the ground is prepared for the movement from human love to divine love. The theological virtues are first discovered within the life of a family: Faith, which is based on the trust which elders give to their children; Hope, which is gradually built on the confidence that neither rejection nor criticism will remove the security of being recognised, wanted, and loved for one's own sake; Love, this most Christian of virtues, which children come to know by being unconditionally loved, and thereby acquire the ability to love others unconditionally.

St John tells us that love is the nature of God. In our on-going task of Christian evangelisation, there is an urgent need to examine the possibility that the family is one of the powerful means by which the presence of God will be discovered, and the sacred lived in our communities.

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The fourth signpost is labelled *Theological Studies*. Scripture exegetes are not mere translators of words, theologians are not glorified catechists, and ethicists are not purveyors of recipe-book type answers to moral dilemmas. In 1986, Professor Ron Crocombe, addressing the Waigani Seminar, called for less work on the Ethics of Development (the topic of the seminar), and more on the development of Ethics! It is a sad fact that, to date, apart from the study done in seminaries by students for the priesthood or ministry, little is offered for the future leaders and administrators of the nations by way of tertiary studies in theology and scripture. The result is an appalling, and, at times, ridiculous naivete on theological issues. It is not that young PNG men and women are not interested – they are. A survey I conducted in 1987 at the UPNG, on behalf of the Melanesian Council of Churches, found that, of all students who participated, 98 percent wanted opportunities to do some study of theology and scripture.

What is needed, and as soon as possible, are opportunities for all tertiary students to study theology and scripture at the same depth as they now currently study secular subjects. The very real cleavage, just beginning here in PNG between religious belief and morality, will accelerate unless church leaders are prepared to contribute time and effort to ensuring that these opportunities are available. There is light on the horizon. Divine Word Institute in Madang, and Goroka Teachers' College (to name two institutions I know of), now provide some assistance. However, in all the work done so far, PNG church leaders have been conspicuous by their absence. It has been the hard work of a few perceptive expatriate Christians that has enabled what few opportunities, that now exist, to be set up.

We can talk glibly about a Melanesian theology, and very learned articles can be written in obscure journals. This just means that an elite (and mainly clerical) coterie can indulge in mutual God-talk, while the vast bulk of the people of God remain ignorant. Knowledge is power. A powerful Melanesian

witness of Christian discipleship needs to be based on sound scientific theological and spiritual study.

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My fifth signpost is *Outreach*. We read in the Acts of the Apostles, 11:27-30, where the Christian community at Antioch sent help to the brethren in Judea by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. Jerusalem, the mother church, was supported, in time of need, by the daughter church of Antioch.

One sign, that a truly Christian ethos exists in Papua New Guinea, still lies in the future. It is that of sending – the Christian mission of outreach. The church here has been slow to achieve self-reliance. Yet, a sign of vitality, of self-confidence, and of generosity, is surely the ability of Christian communities to send forth their own missionaries.

Perceptive observers have noted that my own country of New Zealand has become thoroughly secularised. The lack of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, the numbing of religious sensibilities, the callous treatment accorded the unborn, the aged, and the unskilled, the loss to the church of the young and the well educated – these are painful things to observe when I occasionally return to the faith community within which I grew to maturity. Yet, the same perceptive observers have also claimed that the regeneration of a Christian ethos in New Zealand society and cultures will come through the life, work, and Christian convictions of the Pacific Islanders. New Zealanders call them “overstayers”, they are increasingly the focus for racial prejudice and discrimination. Yet they are the true Christian missionaries, eliciting from both Maori and Pakeha races a re-dedication to Christ, whose teachings have become obscured as my fellow countrymen and women sank into a morass of affluence and covetousness.

Who knows what the Lord has in store for His disciples in Papua New Guinea? I make no claim to be a prophet – but to the people of this country will also come the command: “Go forth and teach in My name.”

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The sixth, and final, signpost is labelled *The Environment*. A Papua New Guinean friend once told me how he stood at a wharf and watched the most

beautiful trees that grew in his province being loaded onto a Japanese ship. His reaction . . . he wept! One eminent Papua New Guinean politician said recently: "It's not a sin to make a profit." Well it can be. Polluted rivers; soil erosion, following on clear felling, and no reforestation; indiscriminate use of pesticides; over-fishing of coastal waters; shoddy buildings, and lack of town planning; unrestricted use of scarce fossil fuels; slash-and-burn agricultural methods: we are no strangers to this sorrowful litany of environmental sins as we gallop after more and more kina. Papua New Guinea has been blessed with a rich bounty of natural resources. But we hold the riches of this country as trustees for future generations.

To murder the earth is a heinous crime. No matter how detestable and horrifying a prospect this may be, it is, in fact, within our power. We can murder the earth by misusing our increasing technological potency. Alternatively, we can redeem the earth by overcoming the suicidal, aggressive greed that man can succumb to.

Economic injustice, and the ecological crisis, are interrelated. They are symptoms of a spiritual malaise. The remedy is a love for one's environment, which inspires the sacrifices involved in not having all we want, but working hard for what we need. This is the poverty, which St Francis of Assisi called Lady Poverty. Lady Poverty endows those who espouse her with the gifts of freedom, wonder, and increasing awareness of the brotherhood of creation. Through evangelical poverty, St Francis acquired his sense of unity, and solidarity, with the rest of creation. We must learn to love, and teach others to love, the environment, because it is God's creative handiwork. Only such a love will prevent us despoiling the environment, because we will then sense that this world is not merely a possession, but our great, ancient, and holy mother.

History tells us that the creation of a Christian ethos is an extremely complex and slow process. Besides following the signposts I have mentioned, we need to base our efforts on some general principles.

A truly Christian ethos will involve giving a Christian quality to many areas of life: to aesthetic activities of painting, music, poetry, fiction, and drama, to the acquiring of a wisdom, which both sees the limits, and relishes the truth and the mystery in all discoveries of the human mind, to patterns of behaviour – the rhythm of work and recreation, ways of ownership, our attitudes towards the aged, the weak, and the stranger.

The creation of a Christian culture requires an active creativity, as distinct from a passive manner of life. Secularised people live their lives in compartments: business, politics, medicine, recreation, etc. Each compartment tends to be self-governing. The rules and customs, which govern economics, for example, are not, in a secularised world, integrated with religion, or any other overall system of meaning. This leaves the individual in a passive attitude. One just acts, or reacts, in any particular compartment by following, or by disobeying, the rules and customs of that compartment. In a Christian culture, the essential integration of human life is rediscovered, so that each area of living can, and does, express the primary meaning of life – to know, love, and serve God. Not all people can be equally creative, in the sense of fashioning radically new ways of acting – but all people can be creative, in the sense of personally seeing their actions as offerings to God, and when most people in a society are creative in this sense, then more and more people discover new ways of acting, which provide new, and deeper, ways of self-expression.

A Christian culture will involve deliberate choices about “input” into one’s mind and sensitivities. One cannot indiscriminately expose oneself to all the TV, videos, literature, advertising, and other influences of secular culture, without being formed by them. Again, this choice does not involve only a rejection.

It involves deliberate cultivation of a better sort of input. It requires access to the rich, but often-neglected, Christian cultures and creations of past ages. It requires fostering new artistic creations, imbued with the spirit of the gospel. Such creations will not flourish in a protected “hot-house” atmosphere, in which shallow works are praised simply because they are pious. Men and women, who aspire to be true Christian artists, must be honest and bold in addressing the questions and social problems of the ordinary people of Papua New Guinea today. The numbing monotony of Kung Fu and Rambo exploits, and the second-rate imitations of European music, to which we are now subjected, are far cries from this ideal.

A Christian requires a critical attitude. To be critical does not necessarily mean to complain. One must refuse to accept passively whatever is offered by the surrounding milieu. One must learn to subject everything to scrutiny, according to the standards of faith. This has implications for how we should

educate; implications not always brought out in the curriculum and pedagogy of our schools.

A Christian culture can exist only within a Christian community. A community is not simply an organisation of people, brought together to produce something. The very life of the community itself, the inter-personal relationships of its members, is the very sacrament of union with God. Among the most powerful forces, by which a culture forms its members, is the action of relating personally to another human being. The kind of persons we become depends, to a great extent, on the kind of interpersonal relationships we live. When Christian congregations are real communities, in which people relate to each other in a way inspired by the gospel, then the basis for a Christian culture has already been provided.

Finally, a Christian culture must have its basis in prayer and meditation. This is not a pious ornament, added on to give a religious look to the process. Prayer and meditation are the basic acts of creating a Christian culture. Prayer and meditation are the most-radical acts, by which we refuse to be formed passively by prevailing secular values, and by which we open ourselves to the one central meaning (with a capital M), in which we wish to form our lives.

Now, is all this talk of creating a Christian ethos in Melanesian cultures naive and unrealistic? Well, it's not as though we have to start from scratch on such a project. Most of the peoples of Papua New Guinea have a confident and dignified cultural identity. We have, in many parts of the country, vibrant Christian communities, whose members are second- or third-generation Christians. We also have, in this country, Christian missionaries, whose sending churches, congregation, or orders, have functioned in the past as Christian counter-cultures. And we have small prayer and action groups emerging. When all this is combined with the still-strong linkage of family ties in most Melanesian cultures – then I don't believe my ideas are naive or unrealistic.

However, let me end with a note of urgency. Our church leaders need to focus on this task of forging a Christian and Melanesian identity now, otherwise the forces of secularisation, already at work in our major institutions and urban centres, will blunt the specifically-Christian dimension of life in Papua New Guinea, and render the constitutional statement that we are a Christian nation empty of meaning.