

EDITORIAL

The Compatibility of Melanesian and Biblical Approaches to Life, Whence Comes a Holistic Approach to Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation?

In this issue, Fr Spencer Kombega, an Anglican priest, shows how traditional Ewa Ge chants to a creator spirit, Sirorari, have been given Christian words, and used in Christian worship. Has the music brought with it overtones of yearning and wander from its pre-Christian origins? Are these overtones of feeling satisfied and transformed by their Christian interpretation, or does an undercurrent of convert meaning subvert the overt sense? In their traditional setting, the chants united feeling and sense in a way that reflected the holistic approach to mind and body of the community that formed them. Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Christian faith sums up all previous incomplete unities. The gospel can convert and sanctify all human feelings. Therefore, there is a long history of stirring secular music being put to good Christian use. In the case of the Ewa Ge chants, also, the rhythms alert the senses and minds of the participants and hearers, so that they attend and respond to what is chanted.

Pastor Kasek Kautil, secretary of MATS, offers a Lutheran approach to the unity of religious and secular life. He points out that we each have a “third eye”, which is our ability to reflect on ourselves, as we are involved in the various compartments of our lives: economic, political, and religious. As we stand outside ourselves in this way, we have a vantage point, from which to see life as a whole, and reconcile all dichotomies, including the Lutheran dichotomy between church and state. From our reflective vantage point beyond our active selves, we recognise that all our lives take place in the presence of God, and we are challenged to take responsibility for the whole of our lives, religious and secular, as

calling for obedience to God. Melanesian culture agrees with this holistic view of religion and secular life, since human beings are seen, not as individuals, but as members of a community. Therefore, any religious feeling will have both economic and political consequences, which will need to be worked out. So, once more, there is a link between a Biblical and a Melanesian approach.

Fr Theodoor Aerts shows how Melanesian culture is in tune with the holistic vision of the Bible. His approach is reminiscent of that in John V. Taylor's book, *The Primal Vision*. We may quote Fr Aerts' article: "A close look at Melanesian worldviews cannot be without benefit, for a correct understanding of the scriptures, which were written by men of a comparable worldview . . . yet always they were related to man's needs, and are a part of his so-called integrated experience."

So Melanesian culture provides an integrated approach, which helps redress the unbiblical dichotomies between man and God, man and man, man and nature, which are fostered by Western culture. What does this sense of integrated community have to teach us about the current concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation? Justice and peace are the result of true community, stemming from the agape-love of God. God loves by taking delight in His creatures, and blessing them, so that they become what He created them to be. The love He gives helps those who appreciate it to do the same, and it is such agape-love that we see in Jesus. He loved people for what they really were, confronting the hypocritical and affirming the misunderstood. He saw beyond the outward effects of oppression and rejection to what people had it in them to be. So He was on the side of the poor, and by restoring them to their rightful place in the community, offered healing, not only to them, but to the community as a whole. When the community recovered the proper order between its members, the unease caused by disorder was removed, and there could be peace. So the good of the individual could not be divorced from the good of the community, nor could justice be divorced from peace. If we may see the stilling of the storm, not as an act of

arrogant domination, but as an act of love, symbolising peace between man and nature, then Jesus is working to bring all creation into one community under God. In that community, the nature of every created force, and every creature, has the potential, if treated with agape-love, to contribute to the building up of the community. The lower orders of creation are not to be treated as if they were persons with wills like human beings, but they have the right to the respect due to a proper understanding of their God-given nature.

In Melanesian culture, natural forces and objects are seen as belonging to the same community as human beings. Is this holistic view the same as what we see in the Bible? In Melanesian culture, the community, as a whole, exists primarily to conserve itself, and so its openness to what is beyond itself, above all to God, is limited. In many PNG stories of the origins of life, the life-giver is put under duress by the community, and made to yield his secret power, so that it can be used by the community. So, the life-giver is than a fully-free and fully-loving God, and the blessing He gives are judged solely in terms of their usefulness to the community, and not for any intrinsic goodness. Thus, any tree that cannot be used for food or shelter is seen as a “tree *natin*”, and may be cleared away, without compunction, when the time comes to make gardens. Therefore, there is an integrated, holistic view of nature in Melanesian culture, but it is restricted by the needs of self-preservation, and falls short of the Christian vision of dying to self, as the means to life.

In a PNG community, the good of the community, as a whole, seems to override the good of individual members, and this applies to both human and non-human members of the community. All would be governed by exchanged or payback. As long as a person, animal, or tree could contribute to the society, he would be supported, so that he could make his contribution as payback. He would make his offerings, including his life, not as a free act of sacrificial love, but as the making of, or submitting to, a demand. So, the land and trees are conserved, not for their own sake, but because of the contribution they make to society. So, when the

land and trees are threatened with being laid waste, the concern is not with their preservation, for their own sake, but for compensation for the loss of their “payback” contribution to the community.

Although the approach of the community to its natural environment is holistic, and includes a sense of interdependence, it is based on communal self-interest, and not on agape-love. Trees, of course, do not willingly give their fruits for the good of others, but, according to a Christian doctrine of creation, they have a natural potential for growth, which is worth developing beyond any consideration of the usefulness of the tree to society. When this potential is properly cultivated, the fruit of the tree becomes available to human beings as God’s free gift. Human beings have a duty to husband the natural processes of death and rebirth, by pruning and thinning, but this is far from wanton destruction. So, good as it is, Melanesian culture will still need transforming by gospel insights, based on the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

This article may seem over-critical about Melanesian culture, and over-naïve about the relevance of the gospel to the conservation of the environment. It is hoped that it is, at least, sufficiently controversial to prompt articles and letters to the editor that can be included in a future issue.

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