

Solving the Problem of the Pigs: a Case Study in Local Theology

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The area of the Highlands, referred to in this study, was first evangelised by the Anglican and Lutheran churches in the late 1950s. Their missionaries were mostly Melanesians, and tended to have a “conservative” approach to the local culture – that is, they assumed that local practices were blessed by God, unless they directly contradicted scripture. Accordingly, they opposed fighting (successfully), and polygamy (unsuccessfully), but their overall attitude was that God was with the people in the midst of their traditional life. They stressed the continuity between the ways of the ancestors and the gospel life and, perhaps, neglected the need for a radical, and thorough, conversion of each individual. In many ways, the evangelisation process was too superficial, with discipleship coming to be seen as a change of behaviour, rather than a whole new way of thinking, but the gospel was preached, and, to some extent, heard.

By the early 1980s, there was some disillusionment with the form of Christianity the missionaries had brought. For many people, Christianity was associated with the economic and social improvements that had arrived at the same time – new tools, money, education, health care – and “development” was seen as one of God’s blessings to His faithful people. As development ground almost to a halt, it seemed that, either the gospel had lost its power, or that the people were doing something wrong. At about this time, the Seventh-day Adventists started to proselytise in the area, and won many adherents from disaffected Anglicans. They appeared prosperous, happy, holy, and articulate about their faith. Their zeal for the gospel was obvious to all. Their message, and the theological assumptions, which underlaid it, was quite different. For them, traditional village life was corrupt, and full of temptations to sin. A radical break with the past, with transformed social relationships, was essential. Accordingly, their converts were encouraged to leave their villages, and live in separate compounds, where they could pursue individual holiness, live in obedience to the Law, and wait for Jesus’ return, without disturbance.

Despite the attractions of this radical Christianity, the majority of their adherents “lapsed”, or returned to their original church allegiance, within a few years.

Typically, they complained that the regime was too strict, and, specifically, that they were unwilling to give up the rearing and eating of pigs. This is, apparently, a very trivial issue, but it has become the main point of contention between the Seventh-day Adventists and the other churches. The difference in the attitude to pigs highlights a difference in attitude to traditional life in general, and raises some serious theological issues for those who have to choose between the churches.

As in many other parts of the Highlands, in this area pigs, are much more than just a source of meat. The killing or exchanging of pigs is a key part of any major event in the life of the clan. A man without pigs will have difficulty acquiring a wife, staging a funeral, seeking forgiveness after a dispute, or finding men to help him with a major work. There is the sense that he is a minor figure, on the fringe of the community. Conversely, many healthy pigs are a sign that a man is blessed, and confer on him power and status. He will be listened to, and looked to, as an organiser and arbitrator, and he knows that he has a place at the very centre of the community's life. For these reasons, pigs symbolise, and represent, the "heart" of the community. God's attitude to pigs is a statement about His attitude to traditional life in general, because such a life is inconceivable without them. If God has declared pigs unclean, traditional life is built on a foundation of sin. There can be no possible continuity between the life of the ancestors and the life of the Christian – they were lost in iniquity. Between the old life in sin, and the new life in Christ, everything must change. All right-thinking Christians should distance themselves from their pig-eating relatives, and all they represent. On the other hand, if God accepts those who eat pigs, there is no reason to believe the traditional community is *fundamentally* corrupt. It may often be very wrong, but it can be healed and restored. It is likely that God was revealing Himself to the ancestors, before they even knew His name; and faithfulness to God will include faithfulness to the members of the community, and their will.

To many, both of the above explanations seem inadequate. The first seems intuitively quite wrong, and flies in the face of their experience. Their principal experience of love, faithfulness, and hope is within the circle of caring relationships, which make up the traditional (pig-eating) community. Only the most alienated of them could believe, from their experience, that the community is founded on sin, and that God is not present there. Very few could, by refusing to have anything to do with pigs, place themselves on the fringe of the community, with equanimity.

But God did, at one time, forbid His people to eat the flesh of pigs. God's laws tend to be seen as roughly equivalent to the "laws of survival": if you put your hand in the fire, it will be burnt; just as automatically, if you flout God's law, you will pay the price. God's laws do not change, any more than the laws of survival, so, if once, He forbade pigs, but no longer, an explanation must be found. The peacefulness and prosperity of the Seventh-day Adventists suggests they may, indeed, be right.

Furthermore, God clearly does demand a radical change, a new creation. It is not enough to affirm His involvement in traditional life, without also indicating how He challenges and transforms it. The theological tension between continuity and radical change, which is expressed by the two different missionary strategies, and, particularly, by their attitude to pigs, is keenly felt, and causes real distress to some. It seems that, whichever church they join, and whichever position they take, they are likely to be wrong.

Resolving the Tension: a Local Interpretation of Mark 5:1-20

One local man solved the problem of whether or not to eat pig meat, to his own satisfaction, in a novel way. He reflected on the gospel story, in which Jesus cast a "mob" of demons out of a man, and into a herd of pigs, which then rushed to their deaths, and concluded that it was a key event in the history of salvation. He speculated that there was an "old" type of pig, which had been forbidden by God to His people. Jesus had gathered all these together in one place, sent the demons into them, and so sent them to their deaths. Jesus had then created, or introduced, a "new" kind of pig, which could be eaten, and which eventually became the mainstay of Highlands' village life. For my informant, this was the whole point of the gospel story.

This speculation is an admirably neat way of solving, for him, a vexing theological problem, and it contains some profound truth. It implies that pigs are not only good to eat, but may even be the first-born of the "new creation"! If so, the very centre of village life has been redeemed. Before the missionaries arrived, and made it known, Jesus had begun the transformation of village life, and healed its heart, replacing sin with a new, redeemed creation. The love and care experienced at the heart of traditional life is, so the story implies, indeed, a manifestation of God's own love and care, and not something opposed to it. In this way, the conflicting demands: of loyalty to the community, and, at the same time, a radical conversion, a seeking of God, above all things, can be reconciled, and shown to point in the same direction. The radical Christian does not need to flee the community, and its love, to find his salvation in new ideas, and a detached

way of life. Instead, he should seek to live faithfully, at the heart of the community, confident that, at its heart, God's healing and redemption are to be found.

So the story seems successful in answering some urgent practical and theological questions for my informant, the more so, as its implications are drawn out. But these considerations do not make the story "right". My initial response was to dismiss it as wild, dangerous speculation. This would probably be the response of anybody educated in a Western way, because the story conflicts with the way we think about Jesus, and about the world. It certainly seems odd that Jesus would have an interest in recreating pigs, and, surely, the gospel writers didn't intend that we should interpret the story in that way. As a statement of general theological principles, or a speculation on what actually happened, the story is clearly wrong.

To dismiss the story on these grounds is to do it an injustice. The story takes the form of a speculation on what might have happened, but its real concern is to articulate my informant's experience of God, and to act as a vehicle for his theological ideas. The reason it feels "right", to him, is not because it fits the norms of biblical scholarship, but because it works – that is, it reconciles his own, apparently contradictory, views of God, and indicates a course of action to be followed. Its use of scripture is more devotional than discursive, and not concerned with making general statements about God, or the gospels. This devotional and speculative way of using the scriptures has a long and respectable pedigree in the West. The context and general meaning are put aside, the scene is imaginatively entered into, and allowed to speak to the heart, rather than the head. It is a way, in which God speaks to the particulars of our lives, and is quite adequate, as long as the results are not treated as formal theological propositions. This story, within its own terms, "works" in bringing its owner into a deeper understanding of his relationship to the community, and to God. Only if we try to subject it to strict rules of biblical interpretation, do we run into trouble – we must accept it for what it is.

For the same reasons, it is "his" story, but I can never make it "mine". Only those who share his concerns, and his worldview, can share the story. Those of us, who do not, can only help to draw out its implications, and allow it to run its course. For as long as it works, and for whom it works, it is to be encouraged; when the issues it addressed no longer seem important, it will, doubtless, fall into disuse, and be forgotten.

Concluding Remarks

Melanesia is a region, where one would expect to see intense theological activity. It has a high concentration of Christians in tight-knit communities, who talk about their faith; Christianity is understood to entail profound changes in ways of thinking and living; the circumstances of life, and the challenges they present, are changing rapidly, and bringing new questions, which demand new answers. I believe such activity is, indeed, taking place, but is often overlooked by church leaders and theologians, because it is informal, and presented in an unconventional way. The people's theological insights should be welcomed, and encouraged by the churches, but, because they are not readily reduced to the language of formal theology, they are often suppressed as wrong, or relegated to the fringes of church life. In this article, I have tried to show how a speculative, even bizarre, story has been used as a vehicle for some real theological insights. It has some features, which are probably common to most of the emerging local theology of Melanesia, and indicates how they should be evaluated.

- (1) It is *pragmatic*. The story is acceptable to my informant, mainly because it “works”. It successfully resolves his dilemma, and suggests a course of action. The question of whether it is “true” is a secondary one. This sort of pragmatism has been a feature of Melanesian Christianity, from its beginnings. In evaluating a story like this, it is a mistake to begin by looking at its content. The first question to be asked is, “What does it do, and how is it applied?” Local theology must be interpreted *functionally*.
- (2) It is *highly specific*, both in time and place. Because the impetus for constructing the story comes from a specific set of tensions, it is unlikely to “travel well”, be usable, or acceptable, elsewhere. There is, as yet, little common “Melanesian identity”. Melanesian societies show great diversity, and are changing very rapidly. The story has meaning for a particular community, in a particular context, but will probably not endure – the issues will change – or make much general sense. The tendency, in academic theology, is to try to reduce everything to general propositions about God, as valid in Rome as in Rabaul, but Melanesian local theologies are too specific for this: they can only be properly evaluated in the context from which they arose. Local theology must be interpreted *in context*.
- (3) It is *non-literary* and *speculative*. Because the story emerges in a community, where books are almost never read, and where formal

education has only had a light influence, it depends on non-literary ways of interpreting scripture, and expressing the results. It clearly departs from the text, on which it is based, and recasts it in the form of a speculative story. Both these features make it less accessible to those of us, taught to treat written texts with respect, and state clearly (i.e., in a non-narrative form) our reflections on them. Story theology cannot be taken apart, piece by piece, without losing its power and meaning: it is, by its nature, open-ended, intuitively, rather than logically, grasped, and difficult to define. The story must be taken as a whole. Local theology must be interpreted *holistically*.

These features, which make the story so difficult to handle theologically, are the ones, which give it its life and power. I believe that most local theologies need to be seen, not as statements about what is true, but as acts of self-revelation by God. If, for a few people, in particular place, it makes God more accessible, and worthy to be praised, then that is enough. It does not matter whether it would do the same in Rome or Rabaul.