

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND MELANESIAN VISION OF THE COSMOS

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Introduction

This article explores Christian worship, as it is perceived by Melanesians, from the background of biocosmic tradition. It is an effort to enculturate Melanesians' sense of life within the cosmic realities. It is to bridge the Melanesians' sense of biocosmic worship, in the presence of power and life-giving ultimate reality.

Melanesians, like other human beings, are religious people. However, unlike those of other societies, whose belief is monotheistic, Melanesians' beliefs were based on biocosmic relationships, expressed in the way they live. Their religious formation was received through these biocosmic relationships. The term "biocosmic" means, in Greek, βίος (*bios*) = life, and κόσμος (*kosmos*) = the world, as an ordered whole; or an ordered system of ideas, which people share, as the sum total of experience of life within their environment. That is, life, as Melanesians experienced it in their natural environment, influenced their ideas and beliefs, which affected their ways of living. Hence the development of their religious culture – a very

down-to-earth experience of life. So now, let us point out several aspects, as we develop the idea of Christian worship, in the Melanesians' sense of biocosmic relationships.

Melanesian Cosmic Sense of Life

Melanesian cosmic sense had played a major role in formulating the religious beliefs and attitudes about life in material and non-material things, such as the natural environment, social structure, ancestors, relationships, and so on. Life, perceived within the environment, was symbolised by the presence of power. If there was power, there was life. If there were no manifestations of power this could mean several things. It could symbolically have a negative meaning, such as death, although death itself is a manifestation of power, or that the spirits were not happy, or that some catastrophic event would be approaching, or wrong had been committed. On the positive side, it could mean a sign of peace, or that the spirits were happy and jubilant, symbolised by a calm atmosphere, as in a calm day. It must be noted here that, while these symbols may be true of one culture, other cultures may have different signs and meanings. This indicates how diverse Melanesian cultures are in reality.

Life, as symbolised in wind and breath, demonstrated force-generating power, and was seen as a gift from the spirits, either of ancestors or spirit heroes,¹ or the Dema-deities.² This symbol of life-power can be recognised in inhaling and exhaling of air for breath, or, as in the case when the wind blows, causing movement of trees, or, as in storms, where wind, lightning, and thunder demonstrate their uncontrollable power. They can feel

¹ See Theodoor Aerts, "Melanesian Gods", in *Bikmaus: A Quarterly Journal of Papua New Guinea Affairs, Ideas and the Arts*, IV-2 (June 1983), pp. 4f.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 13ff. Aerts discusses various Melanesian gods, ranging from ancestors, culture heroes, and Dema-deities, whom people venerated as the sources from whom they received daily, gifts, such as power to work, and food, they got from game, as hunters and gatherers, or as horticulturists, for their sustenance.

the force of the wind, by its effects, but they cannot see it. Such demonstration of power made the environment come to animation, a sign of the presence of spirit being(s). That made Melanesians have a sense of feeling of awe within their cosmos. This kind of awesomeness was universally found elsewhere among primal societies: an exceedingly-important part of every religion. For Melanesians, this experience had had the effect of unifying different communities in their society. In spite of obvious differences among various cultures, such identity made Melanesians share common societal beliefs about life beyond the present state of physical existence.

Sacrality of Life

Power was a symbol of pneumatic life, because it was not created by humans, but was experienced within the natural environment. Power demonstratively experienced in things, such as caves, because of their depth, and the sound coming out of them, trees, perhaps by their unusual and awesome size, mountains, by their majestic heights, the sky, by its vast space with sun, moon, stars, and clouds, which produced thunder and lightening, and so on, became sacred spaces to be reckoned with, honoured, and respected. For Melanesian hunters and gatherers, herders and pastoralists, and, later, as horticulturalists and fishers,³ experienced these as sacred spaces, or places of spirits, the real life-giving entities who presented themselves with dynamism through amazing power manifestations. These bodies were regarded as sacred, because they were generally accepted places where spirit-gods manifested power, as a sign of their living presence among humans, or a place where humans entered the realm of the spirits.

Life, as seen in this cosmic sense, was beyond human reach. The remoteness of life made life, in a sense, impersonal

³ Cf. Ennio Mantovani, "Comparative Analysis of Cultures and Religions", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point 6* (1984), pp. 49-86.

and sacred. However, we must realise that one of the attributes of the initiation rituals was the concept of death and life. Life can be attained by death, and death to self, and past impure experiences, in order to emerge into a new life, mature in the beliefs and practices of the ancestors. Such dying meant continuation of life in the other true world, which was ritually cleansed. Such a worldview was similar to the Dayak of Borneo sacred world, about which Eliade wrote:

The real native village of mankind is not this world: it is Batu Nindan Tarong, in the Upperworld. Man dwells only for a time in this world, which is “lent” to him, and when the time has come, and he is old, then he returns forever to his original home. To die is not to become dead; it is called *buli*, to return home. This idea has nothing to do with any Christian influence; it is an ancient Dayak concept, which is understandable in relation to the primeval sacred events, and the mode of thought connected with them.⁴

This is an interesting worldview, connecting the development of the Dema myths,⁵ common in Melanesia, to give meaning to the experience of life. Therefore, life had to be entered into by a process of dying, re-enacted through initiation rituals. Initiation rituals are symbols of inner change, whereby one had to experience an inner death in order to emerge into a new stage of life; a much-needed innovation for religious spiritual survival. To make the initiation rituals innovative, there was found wanting a need to venerate the unusual, what was an awesome, and inspiring, sight or event.

Viewed with that vision of life, such experience of awesome and inspiring dynamic nature, real life was seen as a

⁴ Mircea Eliade, “Man and the Sacred”, in *From Primitives to Zen*, Part 2, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1974, p. 4.

⁵ See the discussion on the Dema-deities by Aerts, “Melanesian Gods”, pp. 13ff.

revelation, an essential gift, by one who was the source of all life. Hence, as a revelation by the spirit(s), life was always considered sacred, because it was coming from outside of human experiences. However, in order to bring that life into human possession and experience, there must be a symbolic exchange of gifts ritually. What was meant by this was that, what humans possessed within their cosmic environment, was exchanged for gifts of awesome power to perform miracles, which renewed and revitalised life, to enhance good relationships in the community. For example, consider the vibrant spirit of celebrations in special occasions, such as feasting. In essence, this was an experience of cosmic expression of people's sense of worship.

For this reason, an exchange was an event of celebration, where giving and receiving took place. Usually, such an exchange took place where the experience of power (life) was manifested.⁶ That place was venerated, as the sacred place for the life-giving spirits; not the place or event, but the spirits of ancestors, or others, such as the garden spirit, or fishing spirit, or creator spirit, and so on, were seen as the medium, which provided, and sustained, the lives of people and communities. That life or spirit, however, was not an end in itself, but pointed towards an "Ultimate" reality, a qualitative reality, which Bernard E. Meland called "Ultimate Efficacy",⁷ and Paul Tillich called "Ultimate Concern".⁸ Mantovani was right, when he spoke of ancestors and spirits as aids or channels, and not themselves, the source of life or absolutes. They were seen as going between the source of life and human beings.⁹ I prefer to use the term "Ultimate Concern", which Christians called God.

⁶ Compare Jacob's dream at Bethel; and Bethel became a place where God was worshipped (Gen 28:10-22).

⁷ Bernard E. Meland, *Fallible Forms and Symbols: Discourses on Method in a Theology of Culture*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1976, p. 152.

⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 40-43.

⁹ Mantovani, "Comparative Analysis", p. 28f.

It is towards that “Ultimate Concern” that Melanesians’ cosmic sense of worship was pointing. Life, as seen through power manifestations in cosmic realities, was a revealed reality. It was a Melanesian theology, or worship, parallel to the Christology of worship in Christianity. For this reason, Christianity, as a revealed religion, has an evangelistic mission in Melanesian culture.¹⁰

In the religious traditions of Melanesians, the natural place to look for cosmic senses of creation, and their attitudes to worship, was in the myths¹¹ of creation, or of birth of new life. In it, one finds their worldview. The basic concept of their model of worldview was that it was “not any more ‘to give’, ‘to bring’, and ‘to receive’, but they become the antinomy between ‘to die’ and ‘to live’, or precisely – as seen against the background of cutting up tubers, in order to plant the various pieces – the antinomy between ‘to kill’ and ‘to grow and to multiply’ ”.¹² In his article, “Melanesian Gods”, Aerts’ interpretation of traditional Melanesian beliefs about spirit-gods, as proposed in the model above, is correctly stated, in regard to

¹⁰ Compare Acts 17:23-31. Let us paraphrase this passage. Christians, like Paul, can say, “As I study your culture, and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found, among your ideas about worship, the attitude, which is directed towards an ‘Ultimate Concern’. What, therefore, is known as Ultimate Concern to you, this I proclaim as the God, who made the world, and everything in it. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in trees, caves, or what human hands can make. He is the God both you and I are concerned about, and Him I proclaim to you. Worship Him as Lord of all creation.”

¹¹ See Wendy Flannery, “Appreciating Melanesian Myths”, in *Powers, Plumes, and Piglets*, Norman C. Habel, ed., Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1979, pp. 162-171. Flannery, here, gave four category functions of myths: in story form, to get the hearers involved in the realities of life; provides the view of what the world was really like; provides speculative, problem-solving, or explanatory, function; presents an eschatological view of the future.

¹² Aerts, “Melanesian Gods”, p. 13.

Dema myths.¹³ But the question of biocosmic relationships is still valid, with regard to the Dema-myths concept. For instance, the reciprocity exchange, based on the “to bring”, “to give”, and “to receive”, concept is still an ideal to hold to, as a bridge between this and the “to kill”, “to grow”, and “to multiply” concept. Melanesian worship centres around these basic ideal concepts.

To sum up the concept, let us put it this way: people brought from the abundance of what was already there, shared it, by giving and receiving; killing what was given; eating or planting it in order to bring about new relationships, or multiplying new forms of life. That is, people gave back to the spirits what they received from them. What was important in this exchange was the rite, which was a religiously-worshipful experience. For example, the pig kill in the Highlands,¹⁴ the Kontu shark calling in New Ireland, the Fish Festival,¹⁵ or Wape, in West Sepik, and so on. Worship was always done in festive activities of exchanges between the spirits and humans and among humans themselves.

Such an exchange, from the point of view of the food-gatherers’ and hunters’ worldview of collecting what was already provided there, was seen as a gift from the Ultimate Concern. They did not need to offer sacrifice. All they knew was that a loving and caring hand had provided all they needed to survive. However, this concept of receiving free gifts had undergone considerable culture change. This came, as the result of realising the need for a human response to the free-gifts concept, in the form of offering sacrifices to the loving and caring invisible hand, or spirit person. Offerings of animals, birds, fruits, and so on, taken from what humans have

¹³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 12-18, for explanations of the concept of culture heroes and Dema-deities of various Melanesian cultures, from food-gatherers and hunters to herders and horticulturalists.

¹⁴ Flannery, “Appreciating Melanesian Myths”, p. 165.

¹⁵ See Donald E. McGregor, *The Fish and the Cross, Point 1* (1982).

domesticated, and even human life, as in cannibalism, as sacrifices were mixed expressions of thanksgiving and/or to avenge the wrath of the spiritual entities. That was the concept, which the herders, and horticulturalists, and fishers developed, because they were able to domesticate fruits, animals, birds, or fishing areas. They have to work to till the soil, feed animals and birds, or paddle over reefs, to produce, or harvest, what they needed. The fruits of their hard work were seen as blessings for the spirit-gods. These people developed the new concept that the activities they performed were a form of worship, and were based on ritual animation, such as dancing, feasting, slaughtering pigs, singing, and so on, to celebrate the blessing of life, and joyous relationships (*gutpela sindaun*) imparted by the spirits of the sky, of the cosmic environment, of the ancestors, to people, either on the land, or on the sea.

All the dynamic cosmic realities symbolised various aspects of “Ultimate Concern”. These rituals were exceedingly important, because they purify man’s tie to the earthly part of his human nature. Rituals also retold myths about how life became dynamically efficacious, as in myths about Dema-deities. In fact, in Dema myths, humans have to participate with the supernatural agent. For instance, a mythical human head being cast away, or burying it at a certain geographical location, producing new life, such as a coconut tree,¹⁶ or killing another human being, such as a brother¹⁷ or sister, that a new creaturely-like life was to be reborn, such as fertility, and multiplicity of human beings, or crops, or animals, and so on, and live on the same plane as all other living beings.

¹⁶ See Ronnie Tom Ole, “Making Sense of the Oneness of Life: A Melanesian Christian View on Creation”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 6-2 (1990), pp. 34f. In that, Ole recollected a Melanesian (Papuan) myth of how a man’s head became the first coconut.

¹⁷ See a PNG Highlands’ myths of two brothers, Mondo and Mundua, cited in Flannery, “Appreciating Melanesian Myths”, p. 165.

Dynamic of Melanesian Worship

Power could not be seen unless it was demonstrated by its source. So, too, spirits could not be seen unless they manifested power. Spirits and power were symbols of dynamic life in worship. The giving of life, charismatic or otherwise, was a symbol of love and caring concern, expressed by the “Ultimate” source. Active and vibrant life gave worship a meaningful and adorable sign of a spirit-possessed life of existence. By means of rites, images of divinity, such as ancestor spirits, and culture heroes, preserved in Dema myths and sky beings, were worshipped in purity and wholeness of existence. Worship activities must be a pure demonstration of power and authority; free from ritual uncleanness. For example, not to have sex, fasting from certain unclean food, strict observance of ritual laws, and so on. By such taboo observances, the gift of health, prosperity in garden production, fertility of human and domestic animal reproduction, and so on, were ensured.

True Melanesian worship of culture divinities and heroes was not totally demonic or evil, as was, and is, commonly, the view held by foreign missionaries and biblical interpreters. But it was a prefiguration of Christian worship, as Melanesians explored to discover the Ultimate source of *gutpela sindaun* (good relationships) for family and community living. How could Abram know of a God, who spoke to him to leave his country in search of a land promised to him, filled with milk and honey, if he was not religiously enculturated by his people, and conscious of the Ultimate Concern? His concept of culture was converted. Hence, God used him for the liberation of His people, and a world entangled in corruption and sin.

Having said that, the Melanesian model or worship, I believe, can spiritually enrich Christian liturgical communities, both externally and internally, with the love and caring nature of God, which human beings need most. Externally, because communities are made up of human beings, with bodies and souls, which are in great need of societal love and care in the

world. Internally, because human beings have both mind and spirit, with deep longings for supernatural empowerment and encouragement, to survive, as human beings made in the image of their Creator. In worship, the chief element is embedded in the interior life of the community. That element is needed most, in order to ensure the integrity and sincerity of the external forms of the community.

I am of the opinion that this model of worship, as a religious community, must be an open expression of the inner content of Christian worship. "Otherwise . . . religion clearly amounts to mere formalism, without meaning and content . . . It should be clear that God cannot be honoured worthily unless the mind and heart turn to Him in a quest of perfect life."¹⁸ That is to say, that our model for Christian worship must be rooted in Christ's incarnation. For the incarnational model to have an impact in the Melanesian cultural model of worship, there must be dialogue between Christ and culture¹⁹ if it is going to produce fruitful and honest results in assimilating Melanesian principles into Christian worship today. The Melanesian model for life, power, and authority, discussed above, is a very important cultural provision to work with. The providence of Christ's incarnation is the model for enculturation of worship today.

¹⁸ Pope Pius XII in *Mediator Dei*, pp. 24:26, cited by J. H. Miller, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol VIII, New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 1967, p. 930.

¹⁹ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1951. Niebuhr, in his book, suggested five models of possible relationships between Christ and culture. His suggestions include: Christ against culture; Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; and Christ the transformer of culture. Out of the five models, the last two are most central to our concern. Christ is the ultimate good, and human culture is the opposite to that ultimate good. However, that is not the end of the hope. The ultimate good must change, and transform, disorder and sin entangled in human culture. Hence, enculturation, more than contextualisation, is, to me, the model for dialogue between Christ and culture.

What is Christian Liturgy?

To accommodate Melanesians' cosmic sense in Christian worship, one has to have the knowledge of Christian liturgy. According to the etymology of the word, "it means any service done for the common welfare of the people".²⁰ That is, any work done for Christian service by people. Writing about its history, Miller said:

For the Greeks, liturgy designated any service rendered to the community at personal expense, or, at least, without remuneration: education, entertainment, or defence. The word referred even to forced labour done for the common good, and later, to an action that had repercussions in the social and political sphere.

The term made its way into revealed literature through the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The translators used it almost exclusively for the chosen people's prime purpose for existence, the worship of Yahweh. However, since, in the Jewish theocratic state, the rulers were representatives of Yahweh, and the people, themselves, belonged to Him, the word liturgy was used also . . . for something done for the state (2 Kings 19:21; 2 Chr 17:19; 22:8).

The same practice was followed by the New Testament writers. Luke, for example, speaks of Zachary's liturgy in the Temple (1:23). Paul calls himself "the liturgist of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles" (Rom 15:16), and also uses the word "liturgy" to refer to the collection taken up for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 9:12), and to the services rendered to his own person (Phil 2:30). The epistle to the Hebrews employs the term for the priestly work of Jesus Christ, "liturgy" in its specifically Christian sense: "We

²⁰ Miller, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol VII, p. 928.

have such a high priest . . . a minister [λειτουργός (*leitourgos*), minister] of the Holies, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord has erected and not man. . . . But now He has obtained a superior ministry [λειτουργία (*leitourgia*), ministry], in proportion, as He is the mediator of a superior covenant, enacted on the basis of superior promises” (8:1-6). This is properly the work of the Christian people of God, for, through Christ’s liturgy, they are able to offer acceptable worship to God, and receive from Him the fruits of Christ’s redemptive work.

Whereas Christian antiquity applied the term to prayer and sacrifice in general, writers in the early centuries made it serve more frequently to denote an official or community service, as opposed to devotions of purely private piety.²¹

In brief, then, liturgy is an integral public worship, honouring Christ as the head of His mystical body, the church. It is any activity, which the church does publicly as the corporate community, whether devotional worship, or service of ministry.

Taking liturgy to mean this, we are now led to ask the question: In what ways can we see Melanesians integrating their religious experiences in Christian worship? Melanesians have a very high sense of corporate mobility in meeting the needs of individual members of the community. Their religious experiences broadly arose from their human and spiritual needs, such as we have outlined above. Too, attributed to in our above discussions, is the belief that Melanesians certainly do not hold on to the secular belief that man exists of his own power, and for his own ends. Therefore, whatever they did, they did it to serve both spiritual and human needs. Spiritual, because they sense

²¹ Ibid.

that power was needed to satisfy their inner hope. Human, because they have a physical nature, which demands love and care. And that can only be properly taken care of by the spiritual nature. The inner person's ultimate concern was to ensure integrity and sincerity of the whole physical being. The physical has to listen to the spiritual voice, and respond in activities, which I call religious worship. What was religious was never private. It was always a public demonstration of thanks and praise to the Ultimate Concern, that is, God. The Jews gave His personal name, Yahweh, Jesus Christ claimed Himself to be the manifestation of Yahweh, the Lord. Melanesians called God by many names according to their various cultures.²² For example, *Yabowaine*, *Anutu*, *Yakili*, *Datagaliwabe*, *Iruhin*, and so on.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics Bible translators, in their work in various Melanesian cultures, have employed some of these names, in their effort to help people know God, and thus worship Him in spirit and truth. This is a great service of love. Thus, when Melanesians use their own names for God to worship the Lord, the cultural terms and practices may remain in form, but the roots, from which the terms and practices now get their life and meaning, have been adapted and assimilated into the Melanesian culture. What was previously their Ultimate Concern for *gutpela sindaun*, expressed through spirits, ancestors, and culture heroes, has been revealed through Yahweh's incarnated Christ, in the person of the Jesus of history. So, worship liturgy, expressed in cultural ways, I believe, will make worship and ministries either pastoral, or charitable, or theological, not only indigenous, but Christian. Worship that matters will be worship, where Christians are at their cultural roots, praising and adoring the Christ, who transforms culture from within cultures.

²² See Aerts, "Melanesian Gods", pp. 1-54.

What Should be the Church's Response?

I think it is honourable to the local Melanesians for the churches to open their minds to the yearning of the local people, who want to express their Christian spirituality, as they understand it, from the viewpoint of their cultures. Churches, therefore, should not force down the throats of Melanesians the Eurocentric theology of Christian liturgy. The gospel and Melanesians must enter into dialogue with one another, through the scriptures, and the church's apostolic tradition.

What we see today, in the Melanesian situation, is that people, both young and old, are responding to the gospel consciously. The liturgical changes in both local and international churches are being influenced by the movement of neo-Pentecostal spirituality. In Papua New Guinea, for example, we are seeing the religious experiences of Melanesians being expressed, as the product of their own experience of Melanesian spirituality, a counter-response to the initial contact with Christian missionaries.²³

For Melanesians, the decision they have made to move from their traditional cosmology to a Christian worldview was a brave decision. The present generation is about four or five generations away from the first Melanesians, who made that decision. Today, five generations later, we are entangled in the advanced technologies and ideologies of the Western world. However, that will never change us from being Melanesians, however educated we might become. What is actually happening, is the fact that a lot of our Melanesian concepts, or ideologies, are going through a process of change. That is a

²³ Compare Bernard Narokobi, "What is religious experience for a Melanesian?", in *Christ In Melanesia, Point, 1 & 2* (1977), pp. 7-12. Note that, here, Narokobi expresses how a Melanesian struggles to express his double identity, between the demands of his tradition and Christianity. He concludes by saying: "Melanesian experience is not, of course, always right. But it has almost always been held to be wrong. Time is long overdue for some of our religious experience to be given its proper dignity. . . ." (p. 12).

process of selecting what is useful, and beneficial, to the community, and discarding what is not beneficial to the community.

Applying these changing processes to Christian worship today, Melanesian Christians will have to be critiques of their own culture. They must not throw every cultural expression away, as this is a regrettable deed for future generations. We have referred to five of Niebuhr's suggested models above. The two I prefer, which are applicable for our purpose in the process of enculturation are: *Christ and culture in paradox*, and *Christ the transformer of culture*.

In the first suggested model, we must be aware that there is already conflict, which we have to face. This is the conflict between God and human culture. Niebuhr said that, for a person, who holds on to faith in Christ and culture, and affirms both, is a dualist. A dualist is a person who is being pulled in two directions. He is an existentialist thinker. As he continues:

. . . the dualist lives in conflict. . . . That conflict is between God and man, or better – since the dualist is an existential thinker – between God and us; the issue lies between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of self. On the one side, are we, with all of our activities, our states, and our churches, our pagan, and our Christian works; on the other side, is God in Christ, and Christ in God.

No matter what the dualist's psychological history may have been, his logical starting point, in dealing with the cultural problem, is the great act of reconciliation and forgiveness that has occurred in the divine-human battle – the act we call Jesus Christ.²⁴

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 150.

Melanesian Christians, in my opinion, are like dualists, on the one hand, and, on the other, they are conversionists, to transform culture. They are like "... a man before God, deriving his life from God, being sustained and forgiven by God, being loved, and being lived; and this man is engaged in an attack on the One, who is his life and his being."²⁵ He (the dualist) is denying that God is his life and being, a fact which he should be asserting. But, because of the conflict he is in, pulling him in either direction, his choices are affected. He is a man who realises that, "All human actions, all culture, is infected with godlessness, which is the essence of sin. Godlessness appears as the will to live without God, to ignore Him, to be one's own source and beginning, to live without being indebted and forgiven, to be independent, and secure in one's self, to be godlike in oneself."²⁶

Melanesian culture, like every other culture, is the result of human ideas and actions. For this reason, it has to be converted, in the same way as the people who created it were converted.

It is, therefore, very important to state that the conflict between Christ and culture is going to be an ongoing struggle. The struggle is not for us only, but other people, in their cultures, are facing it, too. The positive thing about the struggle, is that God, who is our life and provider, is with us. How? If God is the Creator of the universe, then we must expect it to contain some implications of its Creator. Even though we do not see the stamp of His signature on objects that we see; it is inexcusable to ignore the fact that people's cosmic sense of their worldview may be an indication of the mind and purpose of the Creator. Hence, the theology of incarnation revealed the mind and purpose of God. He (Christ) is the focus of Christian worship today.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Based on religious categories of values and meanings, Melanesians were able to grasp the gospel message, and its essence. Their religious psychology provided them with the antenna to receive the gospel wavelength (message), so that they could talk, and interpret, the revelation of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. By the process of interaction between the gospel message and the culture, they were able to both appropriate and acknowledge their presuppositions and assumptions, to make their worship not only alive and enthusiastic, but dynamic and authentic as well. Because cultures change, liturgies must also change, wherever it is appropriate, and allow the gradual assimilation of Melanesian religious experiences in both worship and ministries. Failure to understand change, will lead to problems. The religious revivalist movements²⁷ today, which are already making their way into the mainline churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, are having an impact on traditional Eurocentric Christian worship and liturgies. Listen to the kind of ecstatic spiritual praying, singing, and dancing, the type of musical instrument used, and the freedom of expressing religious feelings and ideas that are becoming the common scene in these churches. These revivalist movements tend more towards the personal Puritan tradition, and are critical of cultural values. Such an approach to worship, is in danger of faulty theology, which affirms the "Christ against culture" method. Culture is seen as completely against Christianity. Thus, indigenising authentic cultural patterns of worship, is regarded as demonic and evil.

²⁷ Cf. Munfred Ernst, *Winds of Change: Rapidly-Growing Religious Groups in the Pacific Islands*, Suva Fiji: Pacific Conference of Churches, 1994. In his concluding remarks, Ernst said: "Looking at the present state of the historic mainline churches in the Pacific, one cannot help but recognise that these churches are, for a variety of reasons, ill-prepared to cope with the problems of social change. . . . It has to be said that the Pacific Islands mainline churches are generally behind the times, in terms of theological reflection on their social reality. They do not understand fully the new political and social circumstances in which they must work, and thus have become a static force in a very dynamic society" (p. 283).

This is not what we want to see happen. But the reality is that it is already happening. Some Melanesians are blindly criticising everything that is cultural. One way we can overcome this attitude is, using the model proposed by Niebuhr, to transform culture. That is, to allow Christ to transform our minds and attitudes; to baptise our inner beings by the Holy Spirit. Let the Spirit of God incarnate Christ in us, so that we can dialogue with our own culture, to change, and even replace, its roots. Melanesians must learn to appreciate their cultures, and stop being prejudicial towards their cultures. As they allow Christ's rule to overcome them, He will, at the same time, reveal to them the effects of sin in human culture. Believing this, culture is surrendered, under God's sovereign rule, and that the Christian must carry on cultural work, in obedience to the Lord.

As one is converted by Christ, one is more positive, and hopeful, in one's attitude toward culture. Such a person is encouraged to work with his culture, according to his idea about Christ in creation. God is the creator of the cosmos, or the world. His view of Christ's atonement affirms God's creative activity in the created world. For Christian Melanesians, if they believe in Christ's death, as God's atonement for human sin, then there should not be any fear of God's wrath, if he works with culture to honour and worship Him. As Niebuhr said: "Hence, man the creature, working in the created world, lives . . . under the rule of Christ, and by the creative power, and ordering, of the divine Word, even though, in his unredeemed mind, he may believe that he lives among vain things, under divine wrath."²⁸

Conclusion

To conclude, let us say that, as Melanesians are ruled by Christ, they must critically, and carefully, analyse their customs, for the purpose of liturgy and worship. Such cultural expressions as dancing and singing, with accompaniment of

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 192.

kundu drums, bamboo flutes, conch shells, and so on, with changed roots and meanings, could be used for worship, to praise God, and to appreciate these as His gifts to man. For example, some churches of this Institute have introduced these things in their worship liturgies. Friends, there is nothing impossible with God. Let us worship Him through His incarnated Christ in the church.

Questions for reflection

- How can we change cultural roots, and still retain external expressions?
- How much resistance have we detected among our own people against the enculturation of worship?

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