

PRE-GOSPEL BELIEF IN VANUATU

Roy B. Yosef

Roy comes from a Presbyterian church in Vanuatu. He is currently studying for his B.Th. at the Christian Leaders' Training College.

Introduction

We read in Gen 2:15-17 that God made man to serve and obey Him. God said that you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

Now, we know from the scriptures, that the moment Adam ate of the forbidden tree, he brought spiritual death to himself, and to all humanity, as well as bringing judgment on creation. Peter Cotterell said there are three elements of death, which came about by the one act of disobedience by Adam, and “they are spiritual death, psychological death, and death in nature”.¹

Rom 5:12 confirms that, because Adam sinned, we are all dead, spiritually. This is both because of our own sins, and because Adam sinned in the first place.

We know that, when God created us, He breathed into us a spirit, but it is not the Holy Spirit. So, when Adam sinned, it is this spirit that is dead to the holiness of God. It is, if you like, contaminated, and alive only to uncleanness. And, because of that, man is alive to the whole spiritual kingdom of Satan, instead of living in submission to God.

We also know from the scriptures that the purpose for man's life is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever, but this has not been the case, because of the fall. The gospel of Jesus offers an answer to the fall, indicating men and women can have a restored relationship with God.

¹ P. Cotterell, *I Want to Know What the Bible Says about Personal Salvation*, Eastbourne UK: Kingsway Publications, 1980, p. 28.

However, millions have died before the good news of the kingdom reached them.

Clark Pinnock asks, “Why should they suffer for a failure to hear the gospel that was due not to their sins, but to the sins of others? God wants His house to be filled (Luke 14:23); how can it be filled without them?”² Unreached millions go to hell, without having the opportunity to avoid it. It is not their fault that they did not hear the gospel.

These are the questions, as well as others, that people ask, when they wrestle with what happens to them, and their ancestors. My discussion, therefore, will be based on the Melanesian (in particular, Vanuatu) perspective of the whole idea, and is based on Dr Graham Miller’s findings about our forefathers’ ideas about God, etc. I shall also discuss the issue of whether or not those who follow other world religions are saved.

Heathen Worship and Duties

In Vanuatu, our forefathers worshipped, and revered, the High God, under such local language names as *Supe*, *Etarō*, *Ictar*, *Tar*, etc. In Polynesia, the name for the High God is *Io*.

They knew the High God, who created all things, and they showed their thanks, by the yearly new-yam feast. Also, they held a feast for a new baby, because they believed that a child is a gift from God. They always gave the best for Him. But, although they believed in this High God, they knew very little about Him.

Our forefathers were fulfilling Gen 1 and 2, even though they did not yet have the Bible. What they had was a set of rules, handed down from their parents, tribes, chiefs, and old people. Anyone who broke any of these rules was likely to be put to death. So, our ancestors had a “God-given” rule of life, which kept them safe, if they knew it, and obeyed it.

I believe that, if our forefathers failed to live up to the standard, which this general revelation required, then they would fall under the statement

² Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992, p. 150.

of Rom 1:21-23. The standard here is that God had given them a conscience to obey the law, written in their hearts (Rom 2:14-15), and that tells them what is right, and gives them warning of what is wrong. So, they were required to live according to the amount of light that they were given. Failing that, they will perish (Rom 2:12).

Although they did not have the Bible, they knew that God expected good behaviour from them. They knew, in their local languages, that He is a living God, that He created all things, that He is a high and mighty God.

However, as in Old Testament times, our ancestors did not know that God had a Son, Jesus. They only knew that God is Spirit – a powerful Spirit, who is everywhere.

They also knew that they must honour and reverence God, by offering straight gifts, and sacrifices of thanksgiving. If someone sinned, he or she must confess that sin, and offer sacrifices, with the shedding of blood.

Further, they had to recognise the chiefs as God's leaders on earth, and know that the laws for the village and family life were God-given. Restrictions given by the chief must be obeyed.

Heathen Ideas about God

They believed in a High God, who is Spirit, and who was not flesh and blood, like themselves. This was very important, as far as their security was concerned, because the bad spirits were their enemies. In their prayers, they would say:

“We men are flesh, we do not have any power, but you, God, are the Mighty Spirit, and the Good Spirit; you can help us, so that the bad spirits may not do us harm.”³

They believed that God was good and just, and rewarded good people, and punished wicked people. He created all things, sustains all things, knows all things, could do all things, and ruled all things in His mighty

³ J. Graham Miller, *Work Book on Christian Doctrine*, Melbourne Vic: Lawsons, 1974, p. 6.

power. The chiefs were His high men on the earth. They were to offer the proper sacrifices to God.

This, to me, shows that, in many parts of Melanesia, animism was not the deepest of our ancestors' religious ideas. The above prayer reflects what the Bible says about God (John 4:24, Rom 1:20, 2:4).

What they Knew About Other Gods

Our ancestors knew and worshipped the High God, but they were also afraid of the bad spirits, which, they believed, could make hurricanes, too much sun, or rain, sickness, and death. Dr Miller said about their beliefs:

They believed in Tapu men, who had power to speak to these spirits, and make sacrifices to them. These Tapu men (witch doctors, *munuais*) had great power in olden times, and often caused death by their charms and spells (called poison), and by their false accusation of innocent people.⁴

Our heathen ancestors believed that it was the High God, who had placed special powers in certain trees, leaves, and charms, to enable the Tapu men to make miracles.

It is obvious to me that it was these Tapu men, who fall under the statement of Rom 1:23, 25. It was this category of people who went to hell. Our ancestors were worshippers of the one God (Deut 6:4). The point I want to emphasise here is that there were people, within the community, who fell away from worshipping the one High God, and became worshippers of stones, trees, reefs, volcanoes, etc.

Heathen Ideas about Sin, Death, and Life after Death

All our ancestors knew that they had fallen into sin and death, but did not know how to escape from it. We have various stories of man sinning against God by eating fruit. They also have prayers, and here is one that Dr Miller heard, when he was a missionary on an island called Torgoa:

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

We are just ordinary men, we have no power, but You are the Good Spirit, You can look through a rock or a tree. Please come and help us, so that we may have power.⁵

The above stories indicate that one of our ancestors had spoiled the work of the Creator, but that some day they will hear about the one who can wash away all their sins. And when the missionaries came with the gospel, our people remembered these stories.

They knew that God has laws that cover all the big things of daily life, such as: payment of offering for use of land, dedication of children, sacrifices for births, marriages, deaths, chiefs, etc., punishment for adultery, stealing, dishonouring the chief or his wives. All these are summed up in one Law: you shall not steal.

The chiefs are God's leaders, who make sure that the people, who break these laws, are punished, and sometimes the punishment was death.

Our ancestors also knew that God could forgive sins, when they are confessed to Him, and the proper sacrifices are made, with the shedding of blood, or of some substitute. But they did not know about God's only Son, Jesus.

They knew where the spirits of wicked people go to after death, and where the spirits of good people go. For example, on my island, when a person dies, if the family or community wants to know where his or her spirit goes, they had to go and check his or her name in a certain cave, and, if they found the person's name in that cave, then they knew that he/she had gone to the good place. But if the name was not there, then they knew that his/her spirit goes to the volcano.

What About Today

The sad thing is that, even today, with the presence of the gospel, people are dying without hearing it. Why? Often it is because they are ignorant. They know the name of Jesus, and see church buildings, but they are not interested. Many educated people, even in Melanesia today, do not care about what the Bible says about God.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Evolution has led many people astray from the truth about God in creation. Furthermore, many people in Western society do not believe in life after death, so they make most of this life. This thinking has also influenced many Melanesians.

Many people in Melanesia today are unevangelised, because of their ignorance. They reject the gospel, by not wanting to listen to it, even though they all have the opportunity available to hear it. A lot of our people, today, have forgotten the truth about God, man, sin, and sacrifice, which is within our culture. As Paul says, “although they knew God, they neither glorified Him nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). These are the people who are in danger of ending up in hell.

What About Other Religions

The teaching of comparative religion has led to a common idea that all religions are good, and that they all lead men to God, even if it is by different routes. But we know from scripture that this is not true. Most religions are without Christ (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.). Some, like Islam, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, say that Jesus was a good man, but that He is not God. So, already, by these statements, they fail to lead people to Christ, as the one true Saviour and Lord. The Bible makes it clear that there is no other name given under heaven, whereby we must be saved than the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). From the Bible, it is clear that these other religions cannot lead people to God, but, rather, they make people careless about the need for salvation in Christ alone.

More and more, we find these false ideas being expressed in Melanesia. It must be accepted that those who reject Christ are lost. And, in the case of those who die before Christ returns, Paul says they are without excuse, because they rejected God when He revealed His presence to them through nature (Rom 1:18-32), and when He spoke to them through their hearts (Rom 2:6-16).

How can the Unevangelised be Saved

The Bible tells us that people are saved by faith. This means that it doesn't matter how far they go with their theology, if they fail to have faith in God, through Jesus Christ, then they are lost.

And, since God did not leave anyone completely without a witness, people are judged on the basis of the light they have received, and how they have responded to that light. I do not know how this light came to Western culture, but I have explained, already, how it came to Melanesia. Faith in God is what saves. Heb 11:6 says:

And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

So, for Old Testament people, and for our Melanesian ancestors, they had to respond appropriately, in faith, to the revelation God gave them in the cultural laws.

It is not so much a question of whether the unevangelised know Jesus, but, rather, the truth that God will give to each person, according to what he/she has done, according to the light they have been given. If people try hard to seek God's glory, honour, and morality, God will give eternal life. Paul, in Rom 2:6-8, says: "God does not show favouritism." I believe this suggests that the unevangelised can be saved by faith, just like anyone else.

Conclusion

The Bible is clear that God did not leave heathen people without some witness of Himself (Acts 14:17; 17:28; Rom 2:14-15). In the case of Melanesia, the Holy Spirit was at work in our islands, long before the coming of the gospel. As in the Old Testament, He prepared our ancestors, with the knowledge of sin, sacrifice, the High God, punishment, life after death, atonement for sin, through the shedding of the blood of pigs, prayer, and thanksgiving. God also gave some of our ancestors additional special revelations, through dreams, visions, and deeper understanding. These, we believe, were done, in God's goodness, to encourage our ancestors to wait in hope for the true salvation. There

are many customs in Melanesia, which are same as those in Old Testament.

To conclude, I do not think that all of those who died before the gospel came, went to hell, but only those who chose to live outside God's revealed laws to the culture, under which they come. Secondly, those from other religions, who reject Christ, and who are not leading people to God, are lost. Lastly, those who reject the gospel, even in these modern times, are lost, also.

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