

# **MELANESIAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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## **Introduction**

The Melanesian is immersed in his own culture, at the core of which is a set of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about life. Into this context, the gospel of Jesus Christ penetrates. The bearer of the Christian message seeks to communicate a biblical understanding of salvation, and its implications. The Melanesian can only conceive the new message from within his own religious traditions. A basic principle of education and communication is to move from the known to the unknown, the felt need to the unmet need, what is already sought to the unsought. We must take seriously this principle, in the communication of the gospel in a different culture. We start with a people with a rich religious tradition. Our goal is to move them, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to accept and to live according to the Christian tradition. Melanesian traditional religion and Christianity, the subject of this article, is the relationship between these two systems of belief. Firstly, I will describe Melanesian traditional religion. Then I will outline several possible approaches to this tradition, showing what I believe to be the best approach for an effective communication of the gospel to Melanesians.

## **Melanesian Traditional Religion**

Actually, there is no such reality as a Melanesian religion. In Whiteman's words "it is an abstraction, built upon a diversity of realities" (1981, p. 1). Melanesia encompasses the islands of Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, North Caledonia, and Fiji in the Pacific Ocean.

This is a land of great diversity – diversity in languages (over 1,200 are spoken), in environments (from island to coastal highland), and so, in cultures. It is impossible to say that Melanesia has one set way of life, or system of beliefs. Yet, different groups do show a relatively similar pattern in their social, political, economic, and religious

behaviour. That, which is the common shared experience of all these cultures, we will call “Melanesian”.

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices that enable a group to understand, explain, and validate the origin and existence of the world, its resources, powers, laws, and techniques. Beliefs and practices, which are indigenous to Melanesia, we will call “Melanesian traditional religion”. The system that Turner defines as a “primal religion” is animistic. Religion is the focal point of Melanesian thinking and acting. Melanesians are very religious people. Religion *is* life. Life’s activities, like gardening, hunting, fighting, giving birth, or even dying, are all religious in nature. Religion permeates all life. In fact, Melanesian life is holistic. There is no dichotomy of secular and sacred, animate and inanimate, living and dead. Melanesian culture is the interaction of all cultural aspects – economics, political, technological, social, and religious – to form a workable system. There is a total view of life, rather than life seen as a number of separate compartments. The real world consists of the supernatural and natural, the physical and non-physical, the living and dead. Man is immersed in this integrated world, and lives in vital relationship with all its parts.

Religion is experience, rather than knowledge. It is in the liver, or stomach (insides), not in the head. It is not a mental assent to a set of doctrines, but a total expression of life. It is not concerned with propositional truth, but with a demonstration of power in daily life. In such a pragmatic ideology, truth is judged by its effectiveness in bringing the desired results. It is true, if it works. As a pragmatic materialistic system, Melanesian traditional religion aims at manipulating the spirits and powers for the concrete this-worldly good of the community, seen as material wealth, fertility, health, power, and prestige.

Melanesian traditional religion is dynamic, not static. There have always been changes going on. When success and well-being are seen as the products of religion, then that religion easily adopts changes, in its search for new rituals, and means to obtain its goal. As goods

passed along the ancient trade routes, so did myths, rituals, and beliefs. Through such interaction, there was significant change.

Robert Glasser says:

The historical context and substance of religious life, belief, and ritual in pre-colonial Papua New Guinea was a situation of change, fluidity and movement (Whiteman, p. 3).

And so, too, in post-contact times, Melanesians, themselves, have been quick to abandon their traditional forms, in the light of the white-man's supremacy. Adoption of European rituals would mean access to European successful life. However, the basic thrust of the Melanesian search remains unchanged – the striving for cosmic life and renewal. And so, in understanding Melanesian traditional religion, it is not enough to describe forms, but it is necessary to reach deeper into meanings – the basic hopes, aspirations, and longings, which find expression in religious beliefs. To these we now turn.

### **The Core of Melanesian Traditional Religion**

Whiteman maintains that the central value of Melanesian religion is cosmic life and renewal. At the core of all belief and activity is the continuation, protection, maintenance, and celebration of life. Life is not mere biological existence and survival, but it is abundant life, life in its fullness. This good life cannot be described abstractly. Rather, it is judged by concrete things, like great feasting, fertility of women, health of children, strength of the tribe, and status of man. In Pidgin, all this is included in the term *kago*, “cargo”. “Cargo” is the ultimate expression of the abundant life. “Cargo” is a symbol. Strelan says:

[I]t includes such things as money, freedom from hunger and death, release from the pressures and frustrations of work, the regaining of status and dignity, as a man, the effortless acquisition of knowledge and power (1977, p. 70).

Abundant life, then, is harmony, peace, unity, and social justice, release from oppression, wholeness, restoration, freedom, security, abundance: this is the desired life, the good life. The Melanesian

strives for this *gutpela sindaun*, “good life”. It is only possible when things are “right”. Man must be in right relationships with others, nature, and the supernatural. When all is well, cargo is abundant. This idealised, meaningful existence is symbolised by wealth.

Wealth indicates a man’s competence at dealing successfully with the earth, his fellow man, and the spiritual powers, at managing well his total environment (Schwarz, 1980, p. 18).

There is, deep within Melanesian religion, a search for salvation, a search for new identity. Time, energy, and attention are given to pursuing this value. Salvation is viewed as a concrete, this-worldly hope. It is a salvation, orientated to the here and now, and not the after life. It will eventuate here on this earth, in this present age. There will be a new order, in which there is “attainment of new power, bestowal of new identity, the formation of a new society, and a renewed fullness of life” (Ibid., p. 20). Cargo is the natural symbol of this new order, in which there is fullness of life and salvation.

Cargo has a deeply-religious significance. It symbolises the action of some power, or powers, to deliver man from what is regarded as evil, and to renew him, his society, and, indeed, his whole world (Ibid., p. 25).

This is the basis of cargo cults, which have emerged as religious millennial movements, seeking a new order and identity, symbolised by cargo. The basic concern of cargo cults is access to divine power, for the purpose of renewal, and the fulfilment of the good life.

In Melanesia, one cannot talk about abundant life, cargo, or salvation, apart from the concept of *mana*. *Mana* is a term used by Codrington, in his study of the Melanesians late last century.

*Mana* is a power or influence, not physical, and, in a way, supernatural; but it shows itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence, which a man possesses. This *mana* is not fixed in anything, and can be conveyed in almost anything, but spirits, whether disembodied souls, or supernatural beings,

have it, and can impart it; and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, or a stone, or a bone. All Melanesian religion consists, in fact, in getting this *mana* for one's self, or getting it used for one's benefit – all religion, that is, as far as religious practices go, prayers and sacrifices (Codrington, 1891, p. 119).

*Mana* is not an abstract concept, but a reality, whose presence can be proved empirically. All conspicuous success is proof of the possession of *mana*. *Mana* makes abundant life and cosmic renewal possible. Without it, there is only existence and survival. *Mana*, then, is central to the celebration of life. Without it there is no true salvation.

### **The Way of Salvation**

This state of abundant life is not the ideal, in which man now lives. The ancestors of the mythical past knew the secret to the good life. However, the ancestors made certain decisions and performed certain actions that deprived Melanesians of the means to obtain the desired condition. The ancestors, themselves, are responsible for man's present predicament – the loss of his identity, status, and self-respect. Some myths attribute this loss to sin, and subsequent judgment, but others blame it on the foolishness and stupidity of the ancestors (Strelan, 1977, p. 67). But there is hope that what was lost will, one day, be restored.

Fateful decisions and actions, which were taken in the past, will somehow be reversed, and man will regain his true identity, his dignity and integrity as a human being (Ibid., p. 68).

The “living dead” now have access to the good life, and they are the ones, who will bring the cargo to the living. Melanesian traditional religion looks to the ancestors for salvation. “They are the alpha and omega of Melanesian religion, especially in the Solomons and the Highlands” (Whiteman, 1981, p. 8). The ancestors have the role of sustaining, regulating, and maintaining life in Melanesia. The spirits of the dead control the circumstances of life, bringing the good life, if they are pleased, but withholding it, causing trouble and problems, if

they are not satisfied. Therefore, allegiance is given to these spirits. If there is a concept of a high god, or creative spirits, they are the object of legend and myth, not worship, for they are inactive, and unapproachable. Attention must be given to spirits and ghosts, who are an integral part of life, and upon whom the quality of life depends. Strelan says:

Man has recourse to magic, to ritual, to various ways of manipulating the powers, who are thought to be responsible for the presence, or absence, of salvation. And he must make sure that his own life, and the lives of all others in his society, conform to appropriate patterns of behaviour. Taboos must be strictly observed; laws must be scrupulously obeyed; good order must be established and maintained. Above all, proper relationships must be preserved between man and man, and between man and the deities or spirits (Ibid., p. 76)

The goal of ritual is the accumulation of *mana*, which, in turn, means cargo. There is a real secrecy to Melanesian religion. For sharing the secrets will mean loss of power. The value of ritual knowledge depends on others not knowing it. Each group personally owns the rituals that they believe work for them. Therefore, there is no desire to share these with others. Since the spirits are local, these rituals may not work in another location, anyway. So Melanesian traditional religion is non-missionary in character.

Salvation is always related to the group, and its well-being. It is not something an individual can experience apart from the community, and the cosmos in which he lives. Identity comes from contribution to the group. Wholeness, harmony, and well-being of the group are expressed in communal feasting, dancing, and celebration. And so, relationships are paramount in Melanesia, and relationships are controlled by *Lo*, "laws". Aherns defines *Lo* as:

The moral actions, and social behaviour, accepted, and expected, by a group, kept secret from other groups, endorsed by the forefathers, and approved by the ancestral spirits (Aherns, 1974, p. 13).

*Lo* then is anything that establishes and delineates relationships in the community that, as already noted, includes the living and the dead. *Lo* regulates all aspects of life. It includes the important concept of reciprocity, for it involves obligations.

Ancestors or deities are, usually, either a partner in the relationship, which is established by *Lo*, or they are expected to safeguard the fulfilment of *Lo*. If *Lo* is properly observed, then the ancestors and deities must keep their part of the agreement: they must meet their obligations. Thus, if, in connection with gardening activities, *Lo* is observed by the ones, who plant and till the gardens, then the spirits and deities, who control fertility, must reciprocate, by ensuring a bountiful harvest. If, on the other hand, *Lo* relationships are neglected, or despised, then misfortune, failure of harvest, loss of power and security may be expected (Strelan, 1977, p. 76).

Therefore, it is essential to establish, maintain, and fulfil *Lo* relationships and obligations, in every sphere of life, in order to achieve salvation.

### **Christianity's Response to Melanesian Traditional Religion**

What then is our response, as Christian communicators to this religious heritage of Melanesians? Bernard Narokobi, himself a Melanesian, appeals to us to take more seriously the Melanesian religious experience.

The Melanesian is born into a spiritual and religious order. Much of life is devoted towards the maintenance and promotion of that given order. . . . Religious experience remains the foundation of any genuine Melanesian. . . . No one can take it away from him or her. Melanesian experience is not, of course, always right, but time is long overdue for some of our religious experience to be given its proper dignity, as has been given to the religious experience of all the great religions of the world (Narokobi, 1977, pp. 8-12).

We must take this appeal seriously. The basic question is, “What is God’s view of culture?” God is supracultural, not bound to any one culture, but working through culture, to reach man. In the incarnation, He entered a specific culture, in order to speak clearly to man. God wants to beautify, transform, and fulfil every culture, by the power of the gospel. We have the responsibility to communicate this life-changing gospel, according to the perspective of the people, and their cultural context. This was Paul’s attitude (1 Cor 9:19-23). To the Jews, he preached Christ as the Messiah, the fulfilment of Jewish expectations (Acts 13:16-41). To the Gentiles, he preached about God, the Creator and Giver of all things, who was once unknown and distant, but is now revealed in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:22-31).

Another important question, which will determine our attitude to Melanesian traditional religion, is “Was God at work in Melanesia before the gospel came?” God certainly created Melanesia. Turner says:

God’s presence has always been latent within Melanesian culture – incarnate, but veiled, or covered. The early missionaries were more revealers than bringers. . . . In Christ, His presence becomes clearer (1976, p. 243).

Other cultures have also struggled with this question. African theologians came to this conclusion:

We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind, at all times, and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know Him, and worship Him. We recognise the radical quality of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people’s previous knowledge of Him (Statement of Ibadan Consultation 1965, Wright, 1978, p. 6).

With these questions, and introductory comments, in view, we will now turn to three possible approaches that can be taken to Melanesian traditional religion.

### **1. Rejection of Melanesian Traditional Religion**

Some have totally rejected any Melanesian religious experience, saying that it is all paganistic, satanic, and wrong. Some foreigners, shocked by certain cultural features, like cannibalism, polygamy, and payback, damned the whole culture as evil, and the work of Satan. In Christian circles, this view is held by those, who see traditional religion as a complete deterioration of true religion, because of sin. The pagan world sits in total darkness, and knows nothing about God, for Satan is in control. Those, with this view, see it as their mission to release people from this bondage. No dialogue is possible. Everything of the past must be discarded, and a new start made.

Because of this approach, often missionaries were not able to communicate clearly with Melanesians. Due to the ability of Melanesian religion to accept changes, Christian forms and rituals were often readily accepted, without significant changes at the worldview level. There was no real encounter, at the core of the belief system. There was never a challenge at the level of “Who is Lord? What power source is being trusted? To what is primary allegiance given?” Because of not coming to grips with these real issues, and the answers given by Melanesian traditional religion and Christianity, a superficial Christianity, with little relevance to life, has resulted. People may appear Christian, by their outward forms, but their thinking is animistic. This becomes evident in times of crisis, such as sickness and death, when there is quick reversion to other power sources. Nominalism, today, is one of the major problems of the church in Melanesia. Religion has become a routine Sunday activity, rather than a total life relationship with the supernatural. Christian missions have been accused of such secularising. Narokobi says:

In terms of religious experience, what was once meaningful, suddenly becomes meaningless, negative, and deserving of abandonment. . . . It is truly sad that a people, who were always spiritual, have suddenly become apathetic, indifferent, and often

quite antagonistic, towards any form of organised religious experience (1977, pp. 10-11).

Certainly, complete rejection of Melanesian religious tradition will not produce a meaningful and virile indigenous Christian experience, church, or theology.

## **2. Melanesian Traditional Religion as a Pathway to God**

The opposite approach, taken by some, is to see all religions as valid paths to God. All people are on a common search for truth. All religions bear witness to the presence and activity of God. There is continuity between non-Christian religions and Christianity. This thinking is the thrust of “Rethinking Mission”, the report of the Laymen’s Inquiry into mission in 1930. It said that the aim of missions was:

to seek, with people of other lands, a true knowledge and love of God, expressing, in life and word, what we have learned through Jesus Christ, and endeavouring to give effect to His Spirit in the life of the world (Hocking) (Price, p. 139).

The task of the missionary is to see the best in other religions, and to help followers of those religions to discover the best of their traditions, and cooperate in seeking social reform, and purified religious experience (Ibid., p. 140). And so, animists must become better animists. With Christian help, the Melanesian can attain the ideals in his tradition that he has not previously been able to meet. This approach is not common in Melanesia today, although Narokobi, I feel, is moving towards this, when he says:

I have no doubt that, had Christ been born into Melanesia, He would have come to fulfil, and make more perfect, the Melanesian religious experience (1977, p. 11).

Richardson makes a clear distinction between “redeeming” and “redemptive”, which helps to explain why this approach is not satisfactory. Melanesian traditional religion is not redeeming, no one can find a relationship with God, through his or her own traditions,

apart from the gospel. However, traditional religion can contribute to the redemption of a people, solely by facilitating their understanding of what redemption means (1981, p. 61). Melanesian culture can be a starting point, but, if it is seen as the means and the goal as well, then the gospel has no cutting edge, and is denied its power to bring change. The gospel and culture must always be held in tension.

If the goal is just the fulfilment of all the longings of Melanesian religion, then Christianity can easily be viewed simply as a means to this end. A village may readily accept Christianity, with the expectation of receiving the cargo of the Europeans. After a time, they become disillusioned, and resent the white man, for withholding the secret to the cargo that he promised he would reveal. The result is a resurgence of animistic practices, a return to the old way, or the emergence of new cargo cults and millenarian movements – maybe these will finally bring the still firmly-held desired goals. Turner gives the name “neo-primal movements” to nativistic attempts to restore traditional religion, with borrowed elements of Christianity. Syncretistic movements are reinterpretations of Christianity, according to the central categories of the Melanesian worldview – the result being an unstable, unbiblical marriage of the two (Turner, 1978). So, to view Melanesian traditional religion as the goal, or the means, of salvation, is an inadequate approach. Between these two extremes, there lies an acceptable healthy response to Melanesian traditional religion.

### **3. The Gospel Interacting with Melanesian Traditional Religion**

The first response is based on the view that all of culture is evil. The second response views all in culture as good. The more appropriate response lies in between, because culture is neither all good, nor all evil. Rather, there are good elements, and evil elements, in any culture. Melanesian culture is not completely evil, and should not be rejected completely, nor is it perfect, with no conflict with God’s truth and standards.

Man was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26). God gave him a cultural mandate relating to family, work, and government. These

commands from God became the roots, from which human cultures grew and developed under man's direction and creativity. God has given all mankind a general revelation of Himself (Rom 1:20). He has written on their hearts what the law requires (Rom 2:15). He has continued His work in the world, not leaving Himself without witness among any people (Acts 14:17). Yes, there are good features in any culture. However, man has fallen. Sin has entered the world, and affected man's total life, so that no culture is perfect in truth, beauty, goodness, harmony, and justice. Evil spiritual principalities and powers seek to control man, and separate him from God's love. Some aspects of culture are demonic, being used by evil powers to imprison man in fear and darkness.

Jesus Christ, the God who entered into human culture (John 1:14) is our example in how we should view any culture. He valued, approved, strengthened, and built upon, the Jewish culture, into which He was born. He attended the Jewish wedding, used illustrations from Jewish life, cared for his mother, paid his taxes, all affirmations of his own culture. But He also judged, and rejected, certain ideas, values, and behaviour of those around Him. He ate with publicans and sinners, touched lepers and dead bodies, spoke with a Samaritan prostitute, and drove out the moneychangers from the temple. Some aspects of Jewish tradition He kept, but added new meaning. He had not come to abolish the Law, but He did add new meaning and depth to the contemporary interpretations of the Law (Matt 5:17-48). Yet, there were also radically-new demands placed upon the new Christian community. Jesus said, "love your enemies" (Matt 5:44). This was a completely new idea for them. Therefore, Jesus affirmed, rejected, changed the meaning of, and introduced new meaning to, traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. His example will help us to respond appropriately to Melanesian traditional beliefs and practices. There will be continuity, discontinuity, transformation, and newness, as Christianity interacts with Melanesian traditional religion.

## **Christianity Affirming and Strengthening Melanesian Traditional Religion**

There are certain elements in Melanesian traditional religion that can be approved, praised, encouraged, and incorporated into Christianity, in such a way as to give richer meaning to the Christian experience. The group is central in Melanesian thought. Christianity can affirm this concept, for being a Christian immediately identifies one with a group, the body of Christ. From Paul's writings, it is clear that relationships between members of the Christian community are very important, indeed. The doctrines of the church, brotherhood, fellowship, hospitality, sharing, and social concern can have rich meaning, because of the communal nature of Melanesian life. The Melanesian holistic approach to life needs to be preserved, so that Christ is seen as the Lord and integrator of all of life. Christianity needs to be viewed as a total life experience, just as religion was life to the Melanesian. Christ is to be vitally linked with gardening, hunting, *wantoks* ("relatives"), sickness – in fact, all of life's experiences. Christianity should be a demonstration of power in daily life, not just an assent to a system of belief, the performing of a ritual, or the keeping of a set of rules. In affirming these aspects of Melanesian traditional religion, and carrying them over into Christianity, we have valuable aids to a deeper appreciation of certain Christian truths.

## **Christianity Judging and Rejecting Melanesian Traditional Religion**

The gospel also confronts Melanesian traditional religion, judging it, and exposing areas of thinking, which need to be radically changed. Christianity demands a complete rejection of certain aspects of traditional religion. Where there is rejection of old beliefs, then new teaching must provide an adequate replacement. Therefore, as I suggest, different aspects that need to be rejected, I will suggest the new teaching that should replace these old beliefs.

First of all, the true source of power must be clearly established. God's power is greater than any other power. God demands complete allegiance to Himself. He will not tolerate man's dependence upon

any other power. Spiritual powers, especially spirits of the dead, do not control the circumstances of life. They cannot be “lords” alongside of Christ, the supreme Lord. The idea that the spiritual powers can be manipulated for the good of the living must be rejected. God demands submission to His power and will. We cannot control Him. He must control us (Eph 5:18). The relationship that man had with spiritual powers (especially fear and reciprocity) needs to be completely made new, as the convert relates to God. The privilege of knowing God, doing His will, obeying Him, serving Him as a loving Father, worshipping, praising, adoring Him, confessing our sins and weaknesses to Him, these are all new dimensions in the Christian’s relationship with the supernatural.

Melanesian traditional religion is man-centred. The gods, spirits, and powers, as well as society, exist for man. Christianity is God-centred. Man exists for God and society. Salvation is not man’s attempt to be right with the supernatural, but God’s gracious, free gift to man, through Jesus Christ. It is all God’s doing. The idea of immanent local spirits need not be rejected, for the Bible does speak of such spirits, but God must not be viewed like them. He is the transcendent, universal, omnipresent Creator, who is a “totally-other” being, holy and distinct from everything else.

The secrecy of Melanesian traditional religion must be replaced by an openness and willingness to share God’s truth with others, yes, even with the enemy tribe. In Melanesia, the “big man” is the key person in the society. Striving for status is a strong motivation behind many social interactions. Jesus was the “big man”, who humbled Himself, washing the feet of others, serving His fellow man, and giving His life in obedience to His Father’s will. The Christian leader cannot imitate the Melanesian big man. He must imitate Christ. He must be the humble servant of all, the one who denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows his Master, to whom he is always accountable.

These two responses of affirming and judging must go together. Tippet says:

In non-Christian religions, there are certain elements, which may be described as stepping stones to the gospel. At the same time, there are other elements in diametric hostility to it. The evangelist needs to remember these two facts, and approach people of other religions with courtesy and sympathy, using the stepping-stones to make his contacts, trying to understand what the other religion is saying, but, at the same time, guarding, with care, the basic gospel message he seeks to transmit (1967, p. 87).

Melanesian, Leslie Fugui, calls this “baptising the best parts, and burying the bad ones, in the name of Jesus”. He adds, “Our traditional culture is a preparation for the new – the offspring can be a new being, strong, full of new life, and everlasting hope.” (Wright, 1978, p. 7) This leads us to the third role of the gospel, as it confronts Melanesian traditional religion.

### **Christianity Building Upon Melanesian Traditional Religion**

Melanesian traditional religion has certain elements that can become beautiful building blocks for a rich understanding of Christian truth. Melanesian hopes, beliefs, and expectations can be used as starting points for communicating the gospel, and bridges or stepping stones to a greater understanding of Christianity. Many things, in fact, can be looked upon as God’s preparation for the gospel. Christianity can build upon Melanesian traditional religion, by adding new meaning, and new dimensions, to what is already present in their beliefs.

The Melanesian is searching for identity, restoration, abundant life, and salvation. Man once experienced the good life, but, through the foolishness of an ancestor, he lost this perfection. This is the story of Melanesian religion and genesis. The hopes and longings of the Melanesian can be explained as a search for renewal of the divine image and glory in man. This is a tremendous foundation on which to build. Surely God has prepared these people for the gospel, by placing this desire in their hearts. The preparation is there, but the answers to the way of restoration, and the meaning of this restoration, are radically different between Melanesian traditional religion and Christianity. This is where new direction and meaning must be added,

in order to transform these beliefs, and bring them into alignment with God's revealed truth.

Christ, Himself, is the fulfilment of all that Melanesians have been waiting and longing for, over thousands of years. Jesus came to bring life, and life abundantly (John 10:10). Whiteman tells of an incident on Santa Ysabel Island, in which spirits of the dead communicated with the living, saying that they were pleased that the church had come to the village, because it was the fulfilment of all their aspirations! Charles Kraft, in conversation, suggested that John, if writing his gospel in Melanesia, might have been bold enough to proclaim Jesus as the Cargo. This would compare with the impact of the declaration that Jesus was the Logos in Greek culture. John took "a Greek concept, and built upon it, filling it with new meaning". This could have been dangerous, but it certainly would have had a powerful impact, when fully grasped. God is the giver of cargo, but cargo is much more than any Melanesian could imagine. Cargo is a person, Jesus Christ, and a relationship with Him. This is an example of building upon a Melanesian concept, and giving it new meaning.

Yes, the means to abundant life is found only in Christ, this is the new way. Christianity must add new meaning and depth to the content of salvation. We have already said that Melanesian traditional religion is very materialistic and pragmatic, concentrating on the now, this-worldly aspects of the good life, symbolised by cargo. Christianity declares that salvation is a present reality, to be experienced in this life, but it is also much more than that. It has future dimensions as well. Salvation is the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, peace with God, eternal life, hope of the resurrection, and a future of dwelling with God forever. God is interested in our material, physical well-being now, but much more in our spiritual well-being, both now, and eternally. However, we must be careful not to create a dichotomy between the spiritual and material, the sacred and secular. Both need to be a part of Melanesian theology. Perhaps a liberation-type theology would be very appropriate in Melanesia. But it could not just be an emphasis on salvation now and in this world, for that would not be moving from the traditional view of salvation. This can be the starting point, but the spiritual and eternal realities need to be held

together, with the pragmatic and materialistic approach, to complete a biblical Melanesian theology of salvation.

There is a biblical parallel to illustrate this. The Old Testament concept of salvation was also very materialistic and pragmatic. The blessing of God was evident by wealth, many children, health, and success. There was little concern for life after death. However, by the time of Paul, new dimensions had been added. Salvation was primarily a spiritual relationship, with a definite hope for the future, expressed as everlasting life. Those, blessed by God, suffered persecution, hardships, shortages, and even death. Somewhere in time, this new dimension was added, so that the idea of salvation was built upon the Old Testament concepts, but given new, and even contrasting, depths. Surely this is possible again. The basic concepts, already found in Melanesian religion can be built upon, and new dimensions added, especially in the light of the central proclamation of Christianity, the cross of Jesus Christ.

A warning is appropriate here. We must be careful that Melanesians do not hold fast to the function of Melanesian traditional religion, and use Christian forms as a means to this end, instead of traditional forms. This has happened, when Christian ceremonies, like blessing the cross, saying set prayers, or taking communion, have become the new means of obtaining the good life, which is still viewed in a traditional way. There must be a worldview change, as Christianity is incorporated into the Melanesian lifestyle.

Between Melanesian traditional religion and Christianity, there are points of contact, and areas of agreement, which need to be grasped, and used. Strelan mentions, in particular, the relationship between the Melanesian idea that the ancestors would bring salvation and the Christian truth that Christ our Ancestor, the second Adam, has provided our salvation (*Ibid.*, pp. 78-81). If we take seriously this approach of building upon, and transforming, Melanesian traditional religion, then we will always be searching for redemptive analogies, functional substitutes, illustrations from Melanesian daily life, and traditional means of communication, to present the gospel – all in an

effort to make our message more relevant and meaningful to Melanesians.

### **Christianity Adding New Concepts to Melanesian Traditional Religion**

As Christianity encounters Melanesian traditional religion, there will be certain truths that have no place in traditional thinking, and must be introduced as radical new concepts. In Melanesian traditional religion, there is no satisfactory explanation for sickness, suffering, failure, misfortune, and death. These things can only be the result of man's failure. Salvation and suffering have no part together. Yet, in Christianity, salvation and suffering are mysteriously linked together. Jesus, the Lord of power, was the Suffering Servant, the Saviour, who died a cruel death. The church in Jerusalem experienced amazing growth, and yet suffered persecution, trouble, and martyrdom; Paul, the great apostle of Jesus Christ, whom we would call "successful", endured hardship, trouble, shortages, and sickness (2 Cor 11:16-33). In the life of the Christian, sickness, misfortune, suffering, and even death, can have a purpose, according to God's will. They can mean victory not failure (2 Cor 12:9). It is important for Melanesians to grasp this new truth, otherwise, they will end up with a "success theology", which says that, if Christians are right with God, they should experience no problems, difficulties, or trials. There is a place for suffering, hardships, shortages, and non-success in the world's eyes, and persecution, in God's plan for His children.

### **Conclusion**

All this impresses upon us the urgent need to know and understand the culture, in which we work. It will mean being with the people, listening to their questions, hearing their concerns, and helping them to identify their deep longings, and basic assumptions. It will mean stimulating them, to develop an ethno-theology, which deals with such vital concerns as ancestors, cargo, power, spirits, suffering, guidance, success, and failure. We must not allow these issues to be buried, but to be dealt with, in the light of God's Word. We should expect that this theology will not follow the individual, spiritual, intellectual, and other-worldly emphasis of Western theology, but emphasise more a

present, this-worldly, communal, holistic approach to salvation. It certainly will be centred in daily life experiences, and in living demonstrations of truth, if it is truly Melanesian.

The total process of affirming, rejecting, transforming, and adding new concepts to Melanesian traditional religion is, in fact, the process of contextualisation. The result will be a relevant, meaningful Melanesian theology. But this is a process, and does not happen all at once. Outsiders should not make such decisions about another culture. It will take patience, on our part, as Melanesians are given time to grasp God's truth, and to discover its dynamic interaction with their own traditional beliefs. In this way, changes may come slowly, but they will be more permanent, resulting from personal conviction, and not from following the desires of someone else. If Christianity can initially work through the vehicle of existing worldviews, then changes can come from within, and at the right level, at the right time, and by the right people.

We would do well to follow Don McGregor's advice:

Communicate Christ, within the context of the existing basic assumptions, beliefs, and village structures, but, at the same time, teach towards a growing understanding of true assumptions, values, and God's world (1976, p. 213).

May God direct national Christians, and us, in this process for His glory.

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