

CONTEXTUALISATION STRATEGIES: THE ANGLICAN CHURCH REACHES NEW GUINEA (1849-1900)

Doug Hanson

Doug lectures at the Christian Leaders' Training College in Papua New Guinea.

INTRODUCTION

Anglican church missionaries arrived on the north coast of New Guinea in 1892, establishing the church in the eventual nation of Papua New Guinea. The story, however, begins decades earlier in 1849 in New Zealand with the founding of the Melanesian Mission. The story progresses, late in the 19th century, with the advent of the New Guinea mission out of the Anglican church in Australia. The story is one of the Anglican church's efforts at relating the gospel message to the Melanesian cultural context. In this study, we will describe and evaluate the approaches used by several Anglican missionaries in communicating the gospel to the Melanesian people.

GEORGE SELWYN: MELANESIAN MISSION FOUNDER

The Melanesian Mission was born out of a transcriber's error, when, at the creation of the New Zealand See, the northern boundary was transcribed as 34°30' north (instead of south).¹ George Selwyn, the first Bishop of New Zealand, took advantage of this error to take the gospel and the Anglican church to the islands of Melanesia. Selwyn, a high churchman, held to the importance of the sacraments, the *Book of Common Prayer* (containing liturgical services of worship), the apostolic succession of the bishops, and

¹ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1985), p. 182.

the *via media*.² He was also sympathetic to the Oxford Movement and their desire to limit government influence in religious life. John Garrett says of Selwyn, “He stood for a sacramental view of the church, for sound life-long teaching rather than sudden conversion, for the historic episcopate in continuous succession from the primitive church.”³ David Hilliard characterises Selwyn’s missionary philosophy as both evangelical and ecclesiastical.⁴ As a high churchman, Selwyn believed that an inherent part of the gospel was civilising the Melanesians. The sacrament of Holy Communion, for example, used man-made bread and wine, which “required the prior existence of agriculture and commerce”.⁵

Selwyn’s plan was not to rely on European missionaries to reach the people of Melanesia, but on “Melanesian teachers, who would Christianise their own communities from within”.⁶ His goal was to sail willing youth from the islands of Melanesia to New Zealand for training. Selwyn brought the first five recruits to New Zealand from the Loyalty Islands in 1849, thus starting the ministry of the Melanesian Mission.⁷ The arrangement was for the youth to spend the summer studying theology, English, and other subjects at St John’s College, and return home to their islands for the winter to evangelise their people. Henry Venn, the secretary of the evangelical Church Missionary Society in England, spoke against the extraction strategy, arguing instead that the students should be trained within their own environments.⁸ By 1860, 113 Melanesians had spent one summer at

² David Hilliard, *God’s Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission 1849-1942* (St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 2. *Via media* is the term coined for the Anglican church’s theological position between the Roman Catholic church and Protestants.

³ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 182.

⁴ Hilliard, *God’s Gentlemen*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8. Selwyn’s nomenclature was “Native Ministry”.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10. The name Melanesian Mission began to be used around 1852.

⁸ Venn also argued against the centralised leadership of missions in a bishop.

St John's College, while 39 had come twice or more.⁹ However, the strategy proved to bear little fruit in the expansion of the church in the islands. A few reasons for this failure was that the English language was foreign to the students, the students' ingrained cultural beliefs could not be overcome with a few months of Christian teaching, and the students were young, and not influential, in their home places.¹⁰

JOHN PATTESON: FIRST BISHOP OF MELANESIA

In 1861, the Anglican church formed the new diocese of Melanesia, and named John Patteson as its first bishop. He was considered a missionary bishop, a new concept in the church, and he began his service by evaluating the strategy implemented by the founder of the Melanesian Mission. As a high churchman, Patteson believed that teaching Melanesians "positive 'dogmatic' truth" was imperative for the establishment of Christianity.¹¹ Hence, the curriculum at St Andrews College at Kohimarama, near Auckland, where Melanesians were now being trained, changed to reflect a more rigorous approach, including indigenous language studies.¹² Hilliard notes, "Patteson devoted himself to the provision of simple grammars and phrase-books of native languages, catechetical literature, and translations of scripture."¹³

By 1867, English was no longer the *lingua franca* of the school, rather the school standardised on Mota – a language used on various Oceania islands. The school then relocated to Norfolk Island, taking on the name of St Barnabas. The length of time students spent at the school grew to 18 months, and eventually six to eight years, in an effort to adequately train the students to be "mission teachers".¹⁴ In 1868, George Sarawia, from

⁹ Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 183.

¹³ Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, p. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Vanua Lava, was ordained as a deacon, becoming the first Melanesian clergyman.¹⁵

Patteson, in one sense, was “not sympathetic” towards Melanesian religions, believing they were “irrational superstitions”.¹⁶ On the other hand, he recognised the Melanesians’ belief in invisible powers. Therefore, he promoted the “principle of accommodation”, in which “Christianity, as an inherently universal religion, should seek to adapt and assimilate itself to the modes of thought and social needs of each race or society”.¹⁷ Patteson felt there were both unchangeable Christian beliefs, and secondary Christian teachings, that could be adapted to the cultural situation. He argued that Christianity should change Melanesian culture as little as possible, only in those areas that were clearly non-Christian – and Melanesians, themselves, were the best judges of what should be changed.¹⁸ This concept was in contrast to the common British missionary philosophy of civilise, then Christianise, or “Christianity-with-civilisation”.¹⁹ This principle of accommodation was not readily accepted by the Anglican church in England until near the end of the 19th century.²⁰

ROBERT CODRINGTON: MELANESIAN MISSION SCHOLAR

Robert Codrington became headmaster at St Barnabas in 1867, continuing the high-church emphasis of interpreting the Bible through creeds and prayers, and conducting of regular liturgical worship. He viewed conversion “in terms of changes in people’s way of life”.²¹ He believed that to help people change; a missionary must first understand the people.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²¹ Allan K. Davidson, “The Legacy of Robert Henry Codrington”, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27-4 (2003), p. 172.

This showed forth in his work as an anthropologist and linguist. In his research, he was interested in the culture of the Melanesians, but only as expressed by the Melanesians. He published his findings in *The Melanesian Languages* (1885), *The Melanesians* (1891), and *A Dictionary of the Languages of Mota* (1896), with “His classic account of *mana* (‘supernatural power’) in *The Melanesians*” becoming “a stimulus to all subsequent investigators and theorists in the field of comparative religion”.²²

In summary, Allan Davidson depicts the missionary philosophy of Codrington, and his Melanesian Mission predecessors, “The Selwyn-Patteson-Codrington approach encouraged a form of ‘enculturation’ of Christianity in the Melanesian Mission before the word was coined, although that enculturation had distinctive Anglican characteristics.”²³

COPLAND KING: FIRST HEAD OF THE NEW GUINEA MISSION

In 1890, Albert Maclaren, an Anglo-Catholic priest, was travelling in New South Wales raising money for missionary work in New Guinea. Earlier, he had worked with Pacific islands workers on the sugar plantations.²⁴ The Australian Board of Missions, an Anglican body, had appointed him head of the New Guinea mission under the supervision of the Archbishop “of the low-church, evangelical diocese of Sydney”.²⁵ While travelling, he met Copland King, an evangelical, who also desired to be a missionary to New Guinea. They eventually landed on the north New Guinea coast, at Bartle Bay, in 1891, assisted by a local New Guinea man, who had worked on plantations in Australia.²⁶ Unfortunately, Maclaren died a few months after arriving.²⁷

²² Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen*, p. 37.

²³ Davidson, “The Legacy of Robert Henry Codrington”, p. 175.

²⁴ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 246.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

²⁷ C. F. Pascoe, *Two Hundred Years of the SPG: An Historical Account of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1701-1900* (London UK: SPG, 1901), p. 465.

In 1892, the Archbishop of Sydney appointed King as head of the New Guinea mission. The first two converts were baptised in 1893, one, a young man, and the other, a schoolboy.²⁸ King was asked to become the first Bishop of New Guinea in 1898, but turned it down. As an evangelical, he was an anomaly among the other European-descent, Anglo-Catholic missionaries, who came to work in the New Guinea mission. King turned his attention to working among tribal groups in the area, learning the languages, translating portions of scripture and of the Prayer Book, studying local botany, and teaching language to new missionaries.²⁹

As an evangelical, King was concerned about the conversion of the tribal people. He stressed that there must be assurance that baptismal candidates were truly converted, and that they understood the significance of baptism. He used Melanesian teachers to reach people in new areas with the gospel. A challenging aspect of conversion was the lack of recognition by the tribal people that “the acceptance of Christianity with their lips must be followed by an acceptance of it in their lives”.³⁰ Thus, encouraging the converted New Guineans to live the Christian life proved more difficult than having them acknowledge the Christ of Christianity.

King was a student of the local tribal culture, capturing his insights in writing. In *Some Notes on New Guinea*, Copland noted the lack of chiefs, the communality of the society, the totemic matrilineal family-groupings, the practice of polygamy, the crops grown, the ownership of land, marriage and childbirth practices, traditional dress, and the role of medicine men, spirits, feasting, dancing, and funerals in the society. He also logged that

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gilbert White, *A Pioneer of Papua: Being the Life of the Revd Copeland King, MA: One of the First Two Missionaries of the New Guinea Mission* (London UK: SPCK, 1929). <http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/png/white_king1929/03.html> July 29, 2009.

³⁰ Ibid.

there was no belief in a highest god, which led to discussion on how to translate “God” in the Bible.³¹ King strove to contextualise the scriptures, as evidenced by his sermon on the marriage feast (preached in the local language):

“Now then, come along to the feast, all you people, Guriga Guriga. Here are heaps of food – taro, yams, and bananas. Come along.” But they would not come. So the men went out, and found others, and said, “Come along to the feast.” But one said, “I must go and catch fish”; another said, “I must go and watch my garden”, and so on.³²

King remained an evangelical, but was supportive of the Anglo-Catholic leadership over him. When a Sydney church claimed that the New Guinea mission was not evangelical enough, King responded by implying that only those that work among the New Guineans understand how difficult it is for a New Guinean to understand sin. He also turned the table on the Sydney church by asking them to prove that their “converts are growing in grace”, despite their claim that “The work is man’s; results belong to God.”³³

MELANESIAN MISSIONARIES

One trademark of the New Guinea mission was the use of Melanesian missionaries to evangelise the people of the north New Guinea coast. John Garrett states, “[T]hey were often the first people to share Christianity by day-by-day life . . . [and] ensured that Anglican Christianity did not seem to be simply the religion of the *dimdim* (whites).”³⁴ James Nogar, from

³¹ Copland King, “Some Notes on New Guinea”, in *The East and the West* by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, vol 111 (January 1905), p. 80. See also Copland King, “Notes on Native Tenure and Other Customs of the Bartle Bay District”, in *British New Guinea Annual Report 1894-1895*, Appendix Q, pp. 39-42. Published as *British Parliamentary Papers, General Colonies* 34 (1970), pp. 241-244.

³² White, *A Pioneer of Papua*, <http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/png/white_king1929/03.html> July 29, 2009.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 247.

Vanuatu, was an example. He stood firm against tribal fighting, refused to appease the traditional spirits, and married into a local tribe. When he died, the local people “praised him”.³⁵ Garret remarks, however, on the “rebellious stirrings among Melanesian missionaries brought in from the Queensland cane fields”.³⁶ These Melanesians had become Christians in Australia, but had received little schooling.³⁷ Raeburn Lange, in his book on indigenous missionaries of the South Pacific, wonders if it would have been better to bring in trained Anglican teachers from the Melanesian Mission.³⁸

The European-descent missionaries recognised the evangelistic zeal of the Melanesian missionaries, but believed that, during the “pioneering stage of the mission”, the Melanesians could “never be more than valuable helpers”.³⁹ Although they recognised that the church should eventually have its own indigenous ministry.

MONTAGU STONE-WIGG: FIRST BISHOP OF NEW GUINEA

Montagu Stone-Wigg, a non-evangelical, was appointed as the first Bishop of New Guinea in 1897.⁴⁰ At his consecration, Stone-Wigg talked of making the New Guinea Anglican church a native, self-supporting church, operated by New Guineans.⁴¹ The first Papuan Anglican priest, Peter Rautamara, was ordained in 1917.⁴² Stone-Wigg had a positive attitude

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ John Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II* (Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1992), p. 58.

³⁷ Raeburn Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in Nineteenth-Century Pacific Islands Christianity* (Christchurch NZ: Macmillian Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, 2005), p. 309.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 310.

⁴⁰ Theo Arts, “Romans and Anglicans in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 7-1&2 (1991), p. 17.

⁴¹ Lange, *Island Ministers*, p. 311.

⁴² Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 249.

towards the New Guineans, viewing them “not as savages, sunk in satanic darkness, but appealing children of God”.⁴³ He favoured liturgy and the sacraments, and imposed them on the fledgling Anglican church in New Guinea. The ethos of the mission seemed to be:

[T]hat, if the gospel and the church, in what was believed to be restored Catholic fullness, could take root in Papua tribes, the overlaid *anima naturaliter christiana*, some spark of latent grace in primitives, would be re-illuminated by the operation of catechism and the sacraments; grace would elevate and redeem the unsophisticated nature.⁴⁴

In 1907, *Mankind and the Church: Being an Attempt to Estimate the Contribution of Great Races to the Fullness of the Church of God* was published, to which Stone-Wigg contributed. The publication offers further insight into how Stone-Wigg understood the gospel’s relationship to culture. He recognised that traditional beliefs included the strong belief in spiritual powers, the manipulation of those spiritual powers, through rituals, and the passage into the next world at death.⁴⁵ Stone-Wigg’s attitude towards traditional religion is enlightening:

What basis is here for the building up of the Christian faith and the Christian life! True, weeds and nettles have grown round and into the foundation; there is much to be cut and cleared away. The stones will need to be reset. But a preparation there has been. The nature has been taught to look out beyond itself. It has learned deeply the

⁴³ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 246.

⁴⁵ M. J. Stone-Wigg, “The Papuans, a People of the South Pacific”, in *Mankind and the Church: Being an Attempt to estimate the Contribution of Great Races to the Fullness of the Church of God*, H. H. Montgomery, ed., (London UK: Longmans, Green & Co, 1907), pp. 34-35. <<http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/hhmontgomery/mankind1907/stone-wigg02.html>> July 30, 2009. Stone-Wigg noted that it took 14 years before missionaries began to understand traditional beliefs.

great principle of superhuman aid and the truth, when at length presented, finds something in the native heart, on which to build.⁴⁶

For Stone-Wigg, it was important that the New Guineans understood the Apostles' Creed, saying, "It is has been the instrument in the Holy Spirit's hands to rescue them from untold ignorance and degradation."⁴⁷ However, he believed that the New Guineans already exhibited many aspects of the "Perfect Life", such as gentleness, unselfishness, patience, and a good temper. According to Stone-Wigg, the "white race" could learn much from the New Guinean.⁴⁸ Regarding conversion, Stone-Wigg was not concerned with saving souls, because Melanesians were not necessarily fallen; rather, he believed the Anglican Melanesian church – by practising a consecrated village life – could be an example of what the true church should look like.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

The story of the Anglican church's march towards Papua New Guinea is one of mixed success and learning experiences. Selwyn's extraction method of training – training Melanesians in a foreign culture – proved unsuccessful; however, his missionary vision influenced his successors to eventually establish the Anglican church in parts of western Melanesia. Patteson's principle of accommodation – that Christianity should be adapted into cultures – was in contrast to the traditional missionary thinking of the day, but proved to lay the groundwork for future Anglican missionary thinking on culture and the gospel. Codrington's in-depth study of culture and language, combined with his view of conversion – changes in people's way of life – exemplified the Melanesian Mission's

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

⁴⁹ David Wetherell, *Reluctant Mission: The Anglican Church in Papua New Guinea 1891-1942* (St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1977), p. 135.

enculturation emphasis. Of course, enculturation had its Anglican limits, as in the required use of the liturgical Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. King's skill in preaching contextualised Bible stories was due to his diligence at learning local languages and customs. He was an evangelical among Anglo-Catholics in the New Guinea mission, emphasising true conversion before baptism. The Melanesian missionaries' abilities to communicate the gospel more quickly than their European-descent, co-missionaries happened, despite their limited formal education. Stone-Wigg viewed God as already in the Melanesian culture, but to reach Him required Anglican methods: liturgy, sacraments, and the Apostles' Creed.

Perhaps there is no better way to encapsulate the Anglican church's effort at contextualising the gospel for the people of Melanesia than by Garrett's biographical comments on Sir John Guise – an Anglican – and the first Governor General of Papua New Guinea. Garrett states, "His biographical data show how Anglican Christianity in Papua, and later New Guinea, as a whole, could facilitate authentic *via media*, a pathway between cultures, while affirming both local identity and a Christian faith, with claims to catholic breath."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 252.

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