

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN MELANESIA

– **Peter Miria**

I want to share with you briefly some ideas on the Christian faith in Melanesia, in its historical context. When we look at the history of Christianity in Melanesia, and, in particular, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, we see that Christianity has been here a little over a hundred years, and in most areas, less than that. I will outline in a sketchy way the stages of the growth of that Christianity over this period.

1. STAGES OF THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Within this length of time, we can roughly indicate two stages of that growth up to now, with a third stage in the process of emerging, or yet to emerge.

The first stage in evangelisation is one of “translation”. Here, Christianity came into contact with the Melanesian people and their culture. The Christian message and life was presented in the forms of a European culture: English, French, German, Dutch, Irish, American, Spanish, Australian, and New Zealand. In this period, translations were made, a few adaptations were made, but, in the main, Christianity, or the Christian mission, had a foreign outlook, and becoming a Christian often implied leaving behind one’s culture.

The next stage in the growth of Christianity was the expansion of missionary activity, through which more and more territory was gained, and more people were brought under the influence of Christianity, or were baptised. In this period, a large majority of the population is Christian. It is in this period that we have the emergence of the local pastors or clergy, who are small in number at first, and fit well into the missionary or mission structure. Gradually their numbers grow, and they form a distinct group within the missionary structure, but are in a minority. In this situation, the minority group gets the impression that they are opposed by the missionaries, who are in the majority, and that

they are prevented from developing themselves. They may be expected to react to this sooner or later in a more-or-less outspoken way.

There is an emergence of a current of indigenous church mentality, which is articulated by them, and they see themselves as champions of the cause of the indigenous local church. This is a period of tension, because we seem to have a rivalry of two views or positions: one, the established position, and the other, just emerging, and seeking to assert itself and establish its identity. It is here that we have a transition period in which the missionary structure, with its established attitudes and mentality, is asked to give way to the emergence of the local church, with its emerging new structure. We are in this transition period in Melanesia.

The third stage in the growth of Christianity, or of the local church, is reached when we have a situation in which the young church has all leadership in the hands of its local agents. Here, the young church plays a more active role in the transformation of its own culture. Here, the tension of the second stage is resolved. The local church leaders holding the key positions now in the local church see that there are certain areas where the services of the missionary are still needed, and so assign these roles to them in the continuing work of building up the local church.

2. A SHORT EVALUATION OF THE PAST HUNDRED YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY

After giving the sketchy outline of the stages of growth of Christianity, I give a brief evaluation of this period.

When the missionaries evangelised the Melanesians in the 19th century, they preached the word of God or the gospel as it had been developed within 18th- and 19th-century Europe. It was the 19th-century European form of Christianity that they presented, while the people heard the message within the traditional worldviews of their culture.

When the missions started here, the science of cultural anthropology was hardly in existence. The reports of travellers, colonial officers, and missionaries were, with a few exceptions, amateur works, which, however well-intentioned, often conveyed a misleading and partial picture of the people. "Missionary activity was strongly animated by the will to save souls, that is, literally to snatch them from hell by baptism."¹ Immediate conversion was sought, treating the natives as sinners, or better, as children, so their worldviews and culture were not seriously considered in their evangelisation.

As Harold Turner has noted, it has been a general tendency of Christianity to play down the pagan culture that it addresses. But it is these pagan cultures, or the primal societies, which have given Christianity its numbers and expansion in the two thousand years of the history of Christianity. This has never occurred in an extensive way in the so-called great, universal, or higher religions. "It could be said that primal religions have understood Christianity better than Christianity has understood the primals. It has hardly ever shown a deep understanding of the religious authenticity, content, or spirituality of primal religions, especially when it interpreted these as superstition, mere animism, devil worship, or the product of human sin or folly."²

Despite the missionary's zeal to eradicate the practices of Satan within the pagan cultures in Melanesia, and to supplant them with those of Christianity, the religious values and practices have persisted, and are still present today. For the deciding factor in this encounter between Christ and the people, through the medium of the preaching of the missionary, was what actually went on in the people who came into contact with Christianity. For this encounter happened at the level of inner being, which remained hidden. Its truth will be brought to light only in its proper time. The seed of the Word of God, which fell on the rich religious soil of the people, will spring, grow, and bear fruit in its own time. Christ, thus encountered, was there not to destroy but to bring to fulfilment.

The preaching of the Word of God has catalysed the inner yearning and desire for salvation, and made the encounter possible. This encounter is the act of faith. It is a “recognition”, an “acknowledgment”, a “naming”, of what they had felt all along in their history, through their experience of life, and the ever-present and ever-permeating presence of the spirit forces, and the spirits of the ancestors. They were now able to recognise Him, and name Him as the Father, who loves them, and gives them life through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Through this faith, a new relationship was brought into being, a Father-son relationship, which grew and developed, and expressed itself in their lives, which is the history of Christianity in Melanesia. Through this relationship in the community of faith, which is the church, the loving and saving presence of God in Melanesia is experienced today.

3. FAITH AS THE RESPONSE OF THE MELANESIAN BELIEVERS TO THE WORD OF GOD

When we talk about the Christian faith in Melanesia, we have to keep in mind that this faith is grounded in the concrete flesh and blood of the Melanesians. It is Melanesian men and women who believe, and these believers are again grounded in their culture, which has reared them, formed them, and given them their beliefs, customs, language, worldview, and identity.

God, in His goodness and wisdom, has called the Melanesians, through His Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to share in the divine life. In faith, the Melanesians have responded to this call of God through His Word, and have entered into fellowship with the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

Hearing the word of God, and responding to it in faith, forms the believers into a community of believers, who become the people who belong to God, and therefore are the people of God, the Body of Christ, the church.

In this commitment of the individual and the community to God in faith, God engages man, who experiences this engagement as a kind of struggle with God, a struggle to surrender to Him in trust and confidence in the concrete human relationships of everyday life, the difficulties, hardships, sufferings, joys, conflicts, contrariness, etc., through which growth and maturity in the Christian faith is achieved. In our context, God engages the Melanesian believer and his culture. On the side of the Melanesian man, this engaging struggle is salvific, it is a conversion, it is a transformation.

4. MELANESIAN THEOLOGY: MELANESIAN BELIEVERS TALK ABOUT GOD

Theology is faith which seeks to understand itself. Since faith in Melanesia is grounded in the concrete flesh and blood of the Melanesians, Melanesian theology is Melanesian believers seeking to understand the meaning of their faith. Thus, doing theology in the Melanesian context, is the reflection and the articulation of the faith experience of the Melanesian community of believers. Theology thus arises out of the community of faith, which is the local church, and so is at the service of that church.

5. THE TASK OF MELANESIAN THEOLOGIANS

The task facing Melanesian Christians, churchmen, and theologians, at this point of time, is that of incarnating Christ in Melanesian cultures. This task has been described by A. R. Crollius as “the integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture, but becomes a force that animates, orients, and innovates this culture, so as to create a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question, but also as an enrichment to the church universal”.³ The principal agents of this process of enculturation are those who belong to the local culture.

Here, the Melanesian theologians must engage God, who comes to meet them in the experience of faith. They must be able to articulate that experience as Melanesian believers.

Theology is an exercise of faith, and the theologian is, therefore, engaged in an exercise that is salvific. This message of salvation, lived and experienced in faith, then highlights the truth about the believers that they are sinners in need of conversion. It is also in this light of the gospel that they interpret the situation at large in Melanesia. Faith then exercises a critical function on culture, which means the believers are able to judge themselves and their culture in the light of the gospel, and courageously point out its evils as well as its good, precisely for conversion to the offer of salvation.

One does theology, then, with one's eye fixed on the needs and aspirations of one's people, i.e., on the signs of the times, so that one is being relevant to one's situation, and speaks the word of God in the language that they can understand. In this task, one has to be versed, both in the cultural heritage of one's people, and also be attuned to the reality of the present situation.

Let me throw in a few questions here: If faith is grounded in the concrete flesh and blood of Melanesians, how can we interpret our past cultural heritage and experience? Can we interpret the past life and experience of the ancestors as salvation in the light of faith? Melanesian believers have to carry on the dialogue between Christianity and their own culture.

We conclude with a kind of statement of faith:

By our faith, we believe that God has claimed us for Himself in His Son Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, by accepting us as we are, Melanesians. And so, we, too, have now joined in the fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are able now to call God our Father in our own language, because we, too, have been endowed with the Spirit of sonship which cries out "Abba, Father", and thus share the experience of being sons in the Son, Jesus Christ. And so we also dare to talk about Him in our own language, so that others may come to believe, and may have life in Him, and so glorify Him for the wondrous deeds He has done for us.

NOTES:

¹ Y. Congar, *Un Peuple Messianique*, Paris France: Ceuf, 1975, p. 147.

² Harold W. Turner, "Old and New Religions in Melanesia", in *Point* (2/1978), p. 14.

³ A. R. Crollius, "What is so New about Enculturation", in *Gregorianum* 58 (1978), p. 735.