

The Trobriand Understanding of Gods/Spirits Compared with the Christian Concept of God

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When comparing Trobriand understanding of gods/spirits with the Christian concepts of God, one faces the difficulty that much of Trobriand primal belief has been lost as a result of contact with Christianity. However, from what remains of the traditions, we can say something about the object of faith, about the relationship of the gods, or God, with the worshippers, about the characteristics or attributes of the gods, or God, and about the means that bind gods, or God, and worshippers together.

We begin by looking at the nature of faith in Trobriand society, and in Christianity. Faith is a universal phenomenon, including every human being, and is experienced in whatever form of religion to which a person belongs. The traditional Melanesian way of living revolved around the world of gods/spirits, who have supernatural powers, and who are behind many aspects of natural or human activity. Thus, in Trobriand society, nothing happens by accident. All is originated by the gods/spirits: for instance, a good harvest is a blessing from the gods/spirits, and a bad harvest is a curse by them. As Simeon Namunu puts it: "Traditional Melanesian ways of living revolve around the world of the spirits. Melanesian communities are spirit-centred, and all explanations as to how and why things happen are concerned with the supernatural activities of the spirits. People's social, emotional, educational, political, economic, and religious life is based on their feelings towards, and beliefs, in the spirits."¹

We may compare this Trobriand faith in the gods/spirits with the Christian faith in a God, who is all-powerful, the originator of everything, and the basis of every aspect of the Christian's life. Faith in this God, who is sometimes described, anthropomorphically, as loving, merciful, gracious, and righteous, or theologically as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, is very similar to Trobriand faith in the gods/spirits, who originate all activity.

¹ Simeon Namunu, "Spirits in Melanesia and the Spirit in Christianity", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4 (1984), p. 93.

When we turn to the relationship between God, or the gods/spirits, and the worshippers, we can ask whether or not the relationship was a personal one. Christians believe in, and worship, a God, whose relationship with all human beings was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The establishment of this relationship began with the patriarchs, who worshipped the same God, who called them, and promised to be with them, and who whom each chose to be patron of their family. Unlike other gods, the Christian god is a personal God, who associated Himself with people rather than places. By comparison, the traditional gods are associated with geographical locations, weather zones, or a specific residence. Though they may be seen as family, clan, or tribal gods/spirits, they do not relate in a personal way, because they associate themselves primarily with locations, and so, are conditioned by space and distance.

The Christian God, in the time of the patriarchs, acted in love, to originate His relationship with His worshippers. According to Karl Barth: "God is Himself, or becomes Himself, in the loving act of creating fellowship with man".² God, in Himself, established this relationship with man, only because He chose to do so out of love. God is known, only because He took the initiative to reveal Himself to man. Man, on the other hand, cannot, by his own efforts, find God. Yet, in the Melanesian culture, it is mostly man who finds the gods/spirits. So, the question to be asked is: How? How did man find those gods/spirits? Through philosophy? Through mysticism? Or through myth? If God did not personally reveal Himself, then the worshippers could not enter into a personal relationship with Him. Because the gods/spirits are attached to locations, the god/spirit of "Tuma", of the Trobriands, cannot be summoned at Rarongo, in East New Britain, because he lives in a rock on Tuma Island, in the Trobriand group. Can he, therefore, be regarded as a personal god, when he cannot go where a worshipper wishes to go?

When we compare the characteristics, or attributes, of the Christian God, and the Trobriand gods/spirits, we find many differences, some of which will now be described. One very distinct difference is that the Christian concept of a God of love, mercy, and forgiveness is foreign to Melanesian primal religion. According to traditional beliefs, the idea of forgiveness is not only difficult to accept, but even irrational. The gods/spirits would *always* punish an offender. Because of this belief,

² J. B. Webster, "Karl Barth", in Sinclair B. Ferguson, ed., *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1988, pp. 78-80.

Melanesian societies have accepted the maxim of “an eye for an eye” as their standard for justice. Punishment for any offence is by the disapproval of the leaders and the people, through which the offender feels rejected by the community. This system was seen as a legal code, which had originated from the gods/spirits. The early Methodist missionary, Dr Bromilow, found this to be very strong in the Papuan Islands region, when he introduced the concept for forgiveness, and so he wrote: “It was to them (the Dobuans), an absolutely new, and apparently incomprehensible, idea”.³ The concept of payback is strong in Melanesian societies. So, because of the fear of punishment by the gods/spirits, or their representatives, people lived in captivity. There was no escape from the fear of gods/spirits. Those fears were set aside, when people were feasting or playing, but were then taken on board again, when the festive time was over. In this respect, the effect of the coming of Christianity has been to bring freedom, by providing a new source of shade to protect the people from the fear of the gods/spirits. Many times, the conversion of people to Christianity is seen as a reaction against the pressures, and fears, of their old religious systems. Some see Christianity as a means of freedom from domination by the chiefs, who, in most cases, are representatives of the deities, and so freedom from such domination can be a quick road to status and prestige. In this way, new things are done within the perspective of, and for purposes set by, the old religion. Traditionally, a Trobriand islander could not own anything more than the chiefs, and so, Christianity gave an opportunity to put away the sanctions, which enforced that tradition.

The comparison between the transcendence of the Christian God, and that of the Trobriand gods/spirits, is a complex one. In the Bible, the Christian god is indeed transcendent, but He also relates Himself personally to His people as a “*Thou*”, and not just an “*It*”. In Jesus Christ, that “*Thou*” became a human being, who lives, communes, interact, and shares our daily lives in real-life situations. In this way, God is actualised in our life-situations, and His hiddenness is revealed through Jesus Christ, who is the “visible image of the invisible God”. In contrast, the Melanesian gods/spirits are still transcendent, hidden, and cannot relate, commune, share, nor interact with people. All concepts of traditional gods/spirits are metaphysical and abstract, not concrete. They cannot be actualised. Many Christians have carried over the traditional concept of the deities, and still see God as a spirit, like the gods/spirits, and not as a personal being.

³ William E. Bromilow, *Twenty Years Among Primitive Papuans*, London UK: Epworth Press, 1929, p. 82.

Because of this, God is seen as a judge to be feared, because He can be angered quickly, and will bring punishment on those who offend Him. Furthermore, when God is seen as a spirit, in the traditional religious perspective, He has no means of relating personally to the human race, and, so cannot be made meaningful in our human context. Commenting on this idea, Charles Forman stated: "The view of God's nature that prevailed in such churches was what has sometimes unjustly been called an 'Old Testament view'. Actually, it followed more the view of the spirits and gods that had existed in the traditional religions than any full-orbed Old Testament view, though some elements in it are supported by the Old Testament. God is seen as the one who created and sustained the natural world, and the human community, and who punished any transgression of the limits He sets in these spheres."⁴

Finally, when we look at the means by which, on the one hand, the Christian God, and, on the other, the Trobriand gods/spirits bind themselves to their respective worshippers, we see a similarity, in that, in each case, there is an agreement between the parties involved. In the Christian case, it is God Himself who made the agreement, while worshippers in the traditional religion discovered their own agreements, by formulating laws, for religious purposes, and by not eating or drinking certain things. For Christians, the agreement is a covenant between God and man, which involves man in covenant obligations of worship, faithfulness, and morality. While the covenant is unilateral in establishment, it is bilateral in accomplishment. Melanesian societies, on the other hand, do not have covenants, but sets of taboos, by which to bind themselves together with their gods/spirits.

In conclusion, we may say that there are many differences between Christian and traditional religion, especially in respect of the characteristics of God, and His relationship with His worshippers, when compared with the characteristics of the spirits/gods, and their relationship with their worshippers. However, there is a similarity in the stance of faith, for faith is a universal phenomenon, expressed in a variety of cultures. The main difficulty for Melanesians, in transferring their stance of faith from gods/spirits to God, is that they risk applying old perspectives and seeking old purposes in their new worship of God. One example of this is that, in Melanesia, worship is compartmentalised, because, traditionally, there were

⁴ Charles Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1982, p. 93.

many different gods/spirits responsible for different departments within the spiritual sphere. So, there is a risk of bringing a compartmentalised approach to the Christian God. The way to counter this is to begin one's understanding of God from the historical person of Jesus Christ. To understand Christ is to understand God.

Bibliography

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