

# PROSTITUTES TALK OF GOD

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Smoke presupposes fire, and, for many, prostitution presupposes immorality. In this paper, I would like to present the result of research I did on prostitution in the Papua New Guinean (PNG) context. As a future minister of the word of God, attempting to make a difference in the lives of the people, I purposely picked this topic to help me come to know, and to understand, God's presence in our own real surroundings. Indeed, the primary aim of this work is to address theological questions, such as, where God is in relation to us, in the context of prostitution. In doing so, I may appear to be justifying prostitution, but, in reality, I want to end the practice. I am trying to address the dignity of the women concerned.

To respect the privacy of the women I interviewed, and those who helped me in this research, I will substitute other names for their real names. I would also like to stress that I am neither defending prostitution, nor condemning the women. What I am interested in are theological questions like, why is there evil? Where is God in this situation? Who is God to the prostitutes? What is Christ's attitude toward prostitution? How do others see prostitution? These questions are intended to promote discussion, and to invoke the Spirit, to unveil God to us, as the God we encounter in our own human experience, rather than the God, as written about by Jewish, Australian, New Yorker, or Thai theologians.

## WHY IS THERE EVIL?

If God is all good, omnipotent, and love *in esse*, then why does evil exist? That is a philosophical question. In fact, evil is our doing. It is the "child" or "creature" parented by us. God created the world, and saw that everything was good. God is the sower, who sowed wheat, but someone else has sown

weeds (Matt 12:25). God entrusted this good world to us for our use, as we journey towards Him. Under our care, disorder or evil enters. From a simple argument between brothers, to traumatic killing, we have a long continuum of pain. The TV brings world hunger into our living rooms. Continued bloodshed in the conflict between Israel and Palestine keeps the Middle East in turmoil. Reports of the immoral behaviour of Catholic priests in America, and elsewhere, paralyse our faith. These give us a dramatic picture of the way our society, and our world of today, are crowded with human failings and sufferings.

To be more contextual, or focused, we can look at our situation, here in Papua New Guinea, and see many things that are sad, horrible, and detrimental. There is so much personal suffering and hidden pain around us, indeed in many of us. If we look at our own backyard, we find homelessness, poverty, and hunger. Rape and rascal activities appear almost daily in the pages of the newspapers. The economic crisis and political lobbying unveil corruption in our human society. The economic situation is so bad that prostitution, or the sale of sex, is employed by some women to make ends meet. Society condemns prostitution, as destroying human dignity, causing problems in family life, and leading to such issues as abortion, divorce, and sicknesses. For these and other reasons, the church condemns prostitution.

### **SILENT SUFFERING**

Prostitution, indeed, is an obvious example of silent suffering. Prostitutes often see themselves as evil, immoral, and engaging in an illegal activity. They remain silent, and in hiding, in a land that claims to be Christian. Prostitutes are most often women, and these women are seeking love, help, acceptance, understanding, and support, but find none. These are women, driven by such circumstances as poverty and rejection, to sell their bodies to men. But where is the relationship? Is love possible? Is there any justice? Did God create women to become prostitutes? The answer is “no”, so why prostitution?

## DEFINITION OF PROSTITUTION

After encountering and interviewing several prostitutes, I understand prostitution as:

Prostitution is the unfree, chosen activity of a person, which entails offering oneself as a commodity for sexual activity. It is an act, which the person performs, to draw out good from evil. The end justifies the means, so to speak, as dictated by the choice between sadness and joy, poverty and wealth, and even death and life.

What the prostitutes shared, and how they define themselves as prostitutes, helped me to categorise them into these three groups:

1. *Professional prostitutes*: This group is well organised. They are very neat, and they do not stand beside the roads, nor go to brothels. They are the ones who supply the hotels, restaurants, businessmen, and politicians. They provide sex for a very high price. Most of them consume expensive alcohol. Providing good service for their customers is very vital. They are very strict with their safety (condom is a must).
2. *“Money talks” prostitutes*: This group is also an organised one, but, unlike the first, these prostitutes are present, almost anywhere in the town. They have a particular waiting place for picking up, which only they and their customers know. They are also in some secret brothels (two in 3-Mile and two in Waigani) not counting the nightclubs. They are available for sex, for any amount of money, but not less than K20. Sometimes they only have sex with men, in order to get alcohol or drugs. The famous expression of this group is “No money, no in”.
3. *Student prostitutes*: This is hard to believe, but is a reality. At some of the places, mentioned above, you will find many students involved in sex for money. Some do it every day, because their parents do not check whether or not they are at school. Some do it during the weekend. The desire to avoid

catching diseases makes this group very popular with men, as the young age of these girls leads men to think that they are “safe”.

The three reasons, given by women I have spoken to, for becoming prostitutes are:

1. Money – the very obvious main reason.
2. Emergency shelter, or a home.
3. Alcohol or drugs.

### **REASONS FOR BEING A PROSTITUTE**

Engaging in prostitution is not a free choice for most prostitutes. Rather, the situation decided their fate for them. Eight out of 10 prostitutes interviewed expressed bitterly that they did not freely choose to live such a life. According to Emily, “I have no other choice; my boyfriend left me unaided, with a child. I tried my luck at all sorts of jobs, but every door, or opportunity, closed in my face. . . . I often ask, what is wrong with me, everything turned upside down on me? Whom do I have to blame? Myself? My parents, school teachers, boyfriend . . . ah, maybe God?”<sup>1</sup>

Tania’s stepfather raped her more than five times on different occasions. Trying to reveal the truth to her mother, resulted in anger and frustration, and being forced to leave the house. “No one listened to me, or believed me. Even the very one, who bore me in her womb, rejected me. My friends turned away, and gossiped about me. I was a good girl, but now I find no meaning in life. I do not deserve to be a prostitute, but what else can I do? Is there any justice out there?”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview of Emily (fictitious name) at 3-Mile brothel on June 22, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> This is from an account of Tania’s life story, as I interviewed her at Boroko (3-Mile brothel) on June 22, 2002.

Jennifer,<sup>3</sup> a student prostitute, aged 16 says, “At first, I was really afraid. I still remember the first time I had sex with a 50-year-old man. . . . Honestly, I did not enjoy what I was doing, but I was proud that, at least, I could give myself in order for my family to survive.”

For Martina, prostitution is a fast way of getting money. “What do you get from your job after a fortnight – K150 or K200? This is not money. I do not want to spend all my time working for this amount. Doing this work (prostitution), I can earn at least K200 a night.”<sup>4</sup>

### **WHERE IS GOD IN THIS SITUATION?**

Listening to these women, I was deeply touched, and moved, to hear about their experiences. I encountered women, who ended up in a world they do not deserve, a world where they do not belong, a world not of their choice, or making. If we have a human heart, we can hear an inner voice inside our being crying out, “Where is justice? Is there any love? Is a lasting relationship possible?” From the deepest level of these questions arises the very fundamental question, “Where is God in this situation?”

Examining the history, or the life experiences of these women, makes it even more difficult for me to see God in their struggles and sufferings. How can I find God in a woman, who was raped by the one who was supposed to show her the love of God? Can I see God in the boyfriend, who left behind a mother with an unaided child? Can I see God in a mother, who sells her daughter for the sake of money? Absolutely not! It is impossible.

However, seeing this problem through the eyes of faith, one can clearly see that God was and is always with them in their struggles and sufferings. God suffered together with Jennifer trying to decide whether to lose her dignity, for the sake of her brothers and sister. Together with Emily, He was abused by the ones He loved and trusted. Together with Tania, He was rejected by

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer’s father left her mother with one sister and three brothers while they were very young. She is still at school, but her mother forced her to become a prostitute, in order to help the family.

<sup>4</sup> Martina is a mother of three children. Her husband has died, and now she wants to be a prostitute full-time.

His own people. This reminds us of the silent suffering of Job, yet God was very much with him. Here we must keep in mind that God is closer to the sinner, sick, poor, and orphan than the righteous. "I have come to call not the righteous, but the sinners" (Matt 9:12). Society does not listen to the cries of a woman, who is hungry, or who has people to feed, but, once such a woman turns to prostitution as a problem solver, society is very quick in its condemnation.

## **JESUS CHRIST AND PROSTITUTION**

For all Christians, Jesus Christ is, and remains, their hero. He is the perfect example of love and forgiveness. He is the lamb of sacrifice. His deeds and words are ever remembered and treasured.

Some men and women, inspired by the life of Christ, take vows of celibacy, obedience, and poverty, and endeavour to follow His footsteps on earth. Christ becomes their model. These men and women are respected and admired for their courage and commitment to live for Christ, by serving His people. Can we see this in the life of the prostitutes? The popular answer is "no", but some prostitutes see themselves as followers of Christ. This may be unbelievable, but, to understand this, one has to think from the situation of a prostitute, and not that of a theologian or scholar.

Out of love, God sent His only Son as the sacrifice to pay for our sin. Out of love, Jesus died a very shameful death. What about the woman, who, out of her love for her son, or daughter, or family, becomes a prostitute? She loses her dignity, is judged as evil, and is rejected by society, yet she sacrifices herself for the sake of others.

Hanging half-naked on the cross is a very cruel death. This dehumanises the person. In this way, Jesus "lost" His dignity for our sake. Are there any parallels between Jesus, half-naked on a cross, and the shame of a prostitute? Prostitution is probably the last thing that any woman could wish for. One of the women interviewed, observed, "This is something, which I can't publicly admit. It is not like saying to someone I am a clerk, or driver, or a government minister, because, by saying that you are a prostitute, you no

longer are assured of a place in society.”<sup>5</sup> Jennifer puts it like this, “I am not proud of being a prostitute, but I am proud that I am able to save my brothers and sister. Just like Jesus, who offered His hands and feet for the nails, His face for the crown of thorns, and His side for the lance, I offer my whole self, because of my love for my family.”

Jesus did not condemn the sinful woman, who anointed His feet. He knew she had suffered a lot, and He said to her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). To the woman, caught in adultery, He said, “I do not condemn you either. Go, but do not sin again” (John 8:11). We need to remember that Jesus took with Him a thief to paradise, while Mary Magdalene (a former prostitute?) went around as the first witness to spread the news of the resurrection.

### **WHO IS GOD FOR THE PROSTITUTES?**

When we try to describe the God we believe in, much of what we say is the mere echoing of what we have been taught. Very few describe God from our own personal encounter or experience of God. It is interesting, and perhaps surprising, that the prostitutes, in recounting their personal experiences, saw God in a very real way.

Most of the prostitutes said that God, for them, is the God who is understanding and accepting of them, despite their sin. “I know that many people do not approve of our source of income, or of what we have become, but God understands, and accepts us, as we are. You men . . . are like animals, all you want from us is our body (the hole in someone’s body), just for pleasure, and not for love.”<sup>6</sup> For them, God is the one they desire to be united with one day. God is the only one who can restore their dignity. Here, some see God as their only “love”, the one they “trust”, and the one with whom they do have a lasting relationship. They even see God as their protector, “I always pray that God will protect me from any disease or

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from an interview with Tania.

<sup>6</sup> This account is from an interview with Annie (a pick-up prostitute). Interview at a Port Moresby Secondary School, on June 6, 2002.

danger.”<sup>7</sup> We read in the letter to the Hebrews that “God loved us with so much love that He was generous with His mercy.”

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this paper is not meant to encourage prostitutes in doing what we all know as something immoral. My intention is that this paper should help us in our exploration and search for a better understanding of God in our own context. In other words, this should help us to describe God in our own words and world.

Who is God for us, in the situation in which we find ourselves, is the key issue behind this paper. Who God is for a bishop, priest, or a theological student is different from who God is to a mechanic, pilot, or doctor. In this way, prostitutes also see and understand God in a different way, according to their own experiences, and personal encounters, in the situation they are in.

Actually doing theology in our own context is not an easy task. Sometimes, we think that only foreign theologians give us the truth about God. This is wrong, and is one of the major obstacles for Melanesians doing theology in Melanesia.

In theological reflection, we must not limit God, because God is greater than what one can ever say or think. God cannot be limited by any definition or formula. God should be spoken of from the richness of each and everyone’s experience, and from the context of every culture. God is not only for the Jews, or Australians, or Americans, or for Rome to theologise about, and categorise for others. God is for the entire, created world. God is the universal God, and we, as creatures of the universe, must try to contribute to the ultimate goal of our being, that is, to be with God – a God of mercy and compassion.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.