

SPECIAL REVIEW

May, John D'Arcy, ed., *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader Point* 8 (1985), xiv + 310 pp., paperback K4.00.

This collection of materials is a must for all teachers and students in the seminaries or Christian training centres of Melanesia, indeed every church worker could do well to absorb its contents. The book puts together better-known theological statements by Melanesian thinkers, made over the last 12 years. Some very familiar names make their reappearance, and in articles which have already been accessible in *Catalyst*, and in the older format of *Point*. In other cases, there is some entirely new matter to enrich discussion, or pieces which have remained in a thesis or mimeographed form until their timely publication in this volume.

The anthology, apart from May's sensible and straightforward introduction, is prefaced by examples of "village theology". Following each other, in turn, we find a bevy of traditional prayers from various cultures arranged by Theo Aerts; a range of hymns (the vernacular ones being translated by Rufus Pech); a few old-style sermons by New Guinean Lutheran evangelists, put together from archives by Gerhard Reitz; an up-to-date manifesto of an independent church, that associated with the famous Paliau Maloat on Manus; and two more literary reflections on village life, one in a play first dramatised at Newton College, Popondetta, on the conversion of a sorcerer, and the other being Bernard Narokobi's deeply-moving account of his mother's last days, up until the moment of her death at Boronugoro village (in the East Sepik).

This first cluster of materials will appear somewhat disparate, if not lacking any obvious thematic unity. But the point of this part of the collection is obviously to show the different sorts of creative theological acts to be found away from the seminaries, or from their scholarship and studied systematisation. Countless things have been going on in the villages, and we are given touches and flavours of the variety. I find myself lamenting that this section has not been spiced with some traditional proverbs (which remain of value to emergent

Christian communities), and also with local sermons developed around the “Melanesianisation” of Western folk-tales. But I have only myself to blame here for not having the time and energy to follow through with my own suggestion to send John May a collage of proverbial or gnomic sayings; and it did not occur to me that some of the sermons I have recently been working on with Eckhart Otto and John Gough for the journal *Folklore* could sit very nicely with the *sasac* of sermon illustrations from the Lutheran records. What May gives us, however, will provide a pointer for a larger anthology of comparable, or related, village expressions. As a relative latecomer to the Melanesian scene, moreover, his translation of the makasol manifesto from Manus is excellent (marred only at one point by the wrong translation in n.1. of “Wing”, rather than “Wong”, for “me/mi i yet”, in the revamped theological “jargon” of the “Paliau movement”).

The second section of the collection is headed “The Melanesian Christian Experience”. Here we find two very well-known articles reproduced in a cluster of five essays. One is by former Deputy Prime Minister, Fr John Momis, on “Values for Involvement”, a piece from *Catalyst*, going back to 1975, which might even be said to have laid the foundation stone of Papua New Guinea’s indigenous theological writing. Another is a second contribution by Narokobi, this one on Melanesian “Religious Experience”, hailing from the special 1977 number of *Point*. Narokobi’s conception of Melanesian religious sensibilities as non-compartmentalised, and as concerned with “life’s own total whole” (p. 70), helps explain why May has included articles in this section which have distinctly political implications. I mean, Momis’ essay, which reflects his characteristic call to work for social justice and a Christian society through political action, and a poignant, questioning statement about the West Papuan-Irian Jayan issue by the Principal of the Christian Leaders’ Training College (CLTC) of the Evangelical Alliance, Joshua Daimoi (who is a Baptist from the Sentani culture area). The other papers in this block – those by Leslie Boseto (former Moderator of the United church and a Solomonese), and Caspar ToVaninara (a Tolai MSC Father) – are more concerned to delineate specific spiritual needs of Melanesians, which can be met by the gospel. Boseto’s reflections have been fully published here for the first time.

In Part Three, there are three impressive comments on the issue of ecclesial localisation. Esau Tuza, a Choiseulese, who lectures in History and Religious Studies at UPNG, and strives to complete his doctorate at the University of Aberdeen, remains a United church minister, and, in what is the reproduction of his 1978 *Catalyst* manifesto, he challenges the United church to avoid concentrating high-level decision-making in expatriate hands, and thus to avoid the breeding of “an inferiority complex in national leaders” (p. 182). Two Catholic lay thinkers, Mark Kolandi and Louise Aitsi, express their dismay at the slow pace towards administrative and spiritual independence, and Aitsi’s contribution is particularly significant for being the one female voice in the whole collection. Hers is a challenging, feminist-sounding statement, analysing ecclesial sexism, though stopping short of any clear suggestions about women’s ministries.

The fourth and last section is obviously of great importance for the editor, since, under the heading of “Theology in Melanesia”, we see three thinkers grapple exegetically and hermeneutically with the relationship between indigenous cultures and the biblical message. Two more Solomonese make their appearance, although the first, Joe Gaqurae, a veritable theological pioneer from the United church, sadly passed away only last year. Gaqurae’s envisaging of a “Melanesian Christ” shows an awareness of black theology elsewhere, e.g., in the USA (p. 212). He has devoted his detailed analysis to possibilities presented for Melanesians in the Bible, and has tended to generalise about Melanesia as a mass of cultures. The last two articles, however, which are long ones, making up over a quarter of the whole *Reader*, provide a rich detailing of specific societies and their religions, first of the quite-recently contacted Kewa by the Southern Highlander, Simon Apea, and then of the fascinating Toabaita by the Malaitan Penuel Idusulia. In both these last items, in fact, we have large slices from dissertations, Apea’s submitted to the Catholic Holy Spirit Seminary at Bomana, and Idusulia’s to CLTC. That is a sign of the times: that more and more impressive theological research will be carried out in the tertiary institutions of the region. From such thesis work, more written challenges and responses are born, thus providing John May with more confidence that floating *Melanesian Journal of Theology* has been well

worth his, and the editorial board's, effort. The *Reader* is certainly likely to stimulate, and I suggest all those who are exercising theological insights in the southwest Pacific should ponder its well-garnished treasures. And I look to students at UPNG, as much as to the seminaries, for worthwhile reaction, especially since three of the contributors (Daimoi, Tuza, and Aitsi) are university graduates in Religious Studies.

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