

# PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN CULTURES

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## INTRODUCTION

The following paper is based on my theological and anthropological studies, as well as on my almost 40-years experience in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. The theological principles, which I am going to apply to the proclamation of Christ, in the context of traditional Melanesian cultures, can easily be applied to the context of other cultures as well.

I am a Catholic pastor with a Master in Theology (Gregorian University, Rome, 1969) and a Doctorate in Sociology (Trento University, 1978). After spending 13 years in Indonesia (Flores 1974-1987), and a few years in Italy and England (1987-1993), I was assigned to the Ecumenical Melanesian Institute of Goroka,<sup>1</sup> where I have been working since 1994.

The paper is limited to the “content” of the proclamation of Christ, although the author is aware that other factors should also be taken into consideration for a successful approach, such as relying on prayer and God’s providence, having a humble attitude, achieving the trust of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Melanesian Institute of Goroka, founded in January, 1970, is presently run by the four mainline churches in Papua New Guinea: Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and United.

targeted population, knowing the language and culture of the society, etc. These factors are very important, and cannot be neglected.<sup>2</sup>

### **IDEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

In regard to the content of the proclamation, my most important theological assumption, as far as the relationship between gospel and peoples' cultures and religions is concerned, is that of the so called "theory or model of fulfilment". According to this theory, Christianity brings to completion what God has already sown in peoples' cultures and religions, while, at the same time, purifying them from sinful elements. This theory is based on the approaches used by Jesus and Christian missionaries in proclaiming the Good News throughout the centuries.

The fulfilment theory is based, first of all, on the approach of Jesus towards the Jewish culture and religion. Jesus came into the Jewish culture, not to "abolish the Law and Prophets, but to complete them" (Matt 5:17).<sup>3</sup> In other words, Jesus came to earth, born to a specific people at a specific time, and in a specific place. He learned how to behave in that culture, learned how to speak in that language, and ministered to the real needs of the people in the context of their historical and political situation. He did not destroy, though he did confront the Jewish culture and religion, and correct its deviations (cf. Matt 5:20-48). In the gospels, the incarnation and mission of Jesus Christ is described as the coming into the Jewish culture of God's Word in flesh, who was "the real light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), and which "shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overpower it" (John 1:5).

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<sup>2</sup> There are various books on the communication of the Christian faith. See, for instance, the groundbreaking work of Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek text has πληρώσαι (*plērōsai*), sometimes translated "fulfil" instead of "complete". The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* comments: " 'Fulfil': this word cannot refer to the simple literal observance; the following six examples negate such a facile interpretation. 'Fulfil' means to bring the Law to perfection. Jesus affirms indirectly that the Law is imperfect, unfinished; He will perfect and finish it" (*JBC*, vol 43, p. 34).

The theory of fulfilment is then based on the practice of the apostles and early missionaries, in regard to the Jewish communities. In their first proclamation of Christ, they made use of Jewish religious beliefs and institutions. Christ's life and preaching were presented as fulfilling prophecies, figures, and institutions of the First Testament. The proclamation of the gospel was done in the familiar context of traditional terminology, beliefs, and practices. Look, for instance, at the titles given to Jesus: Messiah, Lamb of God, Second Adam, High Priest, Word and Wisdom of God, Son of Man, Redeemer, Paschal Lamb, Rabbi, etc. They must have sounded very familiar to the Jews.

The "completion" brought about by Jesus did not only regard the Jewish legislation, but also its religious institutions and symbols. Jesus is the "second Adam" (cf. Rom 5:14), the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the "Supreme High Priest" (Heb 4:14), "the Mediator of a better Covenant" (cf. Heb 8:6-7), "the new temple" (cf. John 1:19), etc. Jewish festivals, too, came to assume Christian forms and meanings, like the Passover meal, Easter festival, Pentecost, the baptism ritual, etc.

Also, in relation to the pagans – the non-Jews – the initial proclamation of Christ strived to build on their beliefs and traditions. Christian missionaries avoided imposing the Jewish Law on the non-Jews (cf. Acts 15), Paul and Barnabas addressed the pagans of Iconium in a way accessible to them (Acts 14), and the same happened in Paul's speech before the Greek council of the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17). The gospel of John borrowed the notion of *Logos* from the Greek philosophers, and the early Western church was strongly influenced by Greek and Roman civilisation in its presentation of the Christian faith, as well as in its institutions.

Ideally – if not always in praxis – Christian missionaries continued to build on the beliefs and customs of the people they intended to evangelise.<sup>4</sup> John

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<sup>4</sup> Worthy of notice are the directives imparted by Popes and the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith to the missionaries sent to England and to China (see Thomas, 1995).

Newman sums up the whole process of “indigenisation” of evangelisation in the following lines:

The use of temples, and those dedicated to particular saints, and ornaments on occasions with branches of trees, holy water, holy days and seasons, use of calendars, processions, blessings on the fields, sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure, the ring in marriage, turning to the east, images at a later date, perhaps the ecclesiastical chant, are all of pagan origin, and sanctified by their adoption into the church.<sup>5</sup>

The fulfilment theory is in line with what Pope Pius XII already wrote in 1951:

The church, from the beginning, down to our time, has always followed this wise practice; let not the gospel, on being introduced into a new land, destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess that is naturally good, just, and beautiful. Therefore, the church, when she calls people to a higher culture, and a better way of life, under the inspiration of the Christian religion, does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit. (*Evangelii Precones* – Heralds of the Gospel – #89.)

To the above statement the Second Vatican Council added some solid theological foundations,<sup>6</sup> which could be summarised by the following quotation:

The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. With sincere respect, she looks in those ways of conduct and life, these precepts and teachings, which, though differing in many points from what she herself holds and teaches, yet not rarely reflect the ray of that Truth, which enlightens all human beings. But she proclaims and must ever proclaim, “the way, the

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<sup>5</sup> Newman, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 373.

<sup>6</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, pp. 2, 16, 22; *Nostra Aetate*, p. 2; *Ad Gentes*, pp. 4, 9, etc.

truth, and the life (John 14:6), in whom humans find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself [cf. 2 Cor 5:18f]. (*Nostra Aetate* – In this Age of Ours – #2.)

On his part, Pope John Paul II supported the statements of the Council in his encyclicals,<sup>7</sup> and in other documents issued by the Vatican during his term of office.<sup>8</sup> He even implicitly referred to the “fulfilment theory” in some documents. The following are two quotations among many:

God’s Spirit presence and activity affect not only individuals, but also society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions. It is the Spirit who sows the “seeds of the Word”, present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for the full maturity in Christ. (*Redemptoris Missio* – The Mission of the Redeemer, 1990: #29.)

The incarnate Word is the fulfilment of the yearning, present in all the religions of humankind: this fulfilment is brought about by God Himself, and transcends all human expectations. Christ is the fulfilment of the yearning of all the world’s religions, and, as such, He is their sole and definitive completion. (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente* – On the Approaching Third Millennium, 1994: #6.)

The theory of fulfilment, while holding a positive attitude towards human cultures, certainly does not deny the presence of sin in all of them. All cultures – including those in so-called Christian countries – wear the stains, and bear the shame of human sinfulness.<sup>9</sup> They may even contain, and perpetuate, corrupting elements. This fact does not generally mean that they are completely depraved, but, rather, in need of purification and redemption.

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<sup>7</sup> *Redemptor Hominis*, p. 4; *Dominus et Vivificantem*, p. 53; *Redemptoris Missio*, pp. 10, 18, 20, 28, 29, etc.

<sup>8</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 19, 31, 50; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 70, 71, 689, etc.

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, pp. 13, 37; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 31, etc.

For sin has been at work in the world, and so religious traditions, notwithstanding their positive values, reflect the limitations of the human spirit, sometimes inclined to choose evil. An open and positive approach to other religious traditions cannot overlook the contradictions, which may exist between them and Christian revelation. (*Lumen Gentium* – The Light of the Nations – #10.)

One major presupposition of the fulfilment theory is that, in similarity with Jesus' and the early Christians' approach, carriers of the initial gospel proclamation are to be well acquainted with cultural and religious beliefs and practices, and more in general with the so called "epistemology" of the targeted population. Such deep knowledge will make the "proclaimers" not only aware of what God has already sown in the culture of the people, but also of the possible misunderstandings of the gospel's message, since it will be received within the people's already-established frame of mind. This deep cultural knowledge is particularly important in Melanesia, since its cultures are very different from those of other continents' populations.

And so the church has this exhortation for her children: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness to the Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral good, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them. (*Nostra Aetate* – In This Age of Ours – #2.)

Another presupposition on the part of the Christian proclaimers' proclamation is their awareness of the cultural aspects of the Christianity, from which they come, as well as of what is essential in the gospel message. There were and are, in fact, many types of Christianity across the centuries, and across the continents.

Besides, the author assumes that the recipients of the proclamation of Christ are not only the non-baptised, but also the baptised, whose knowledge of Christ is not adequate, or even false, which is often the case among the baptised in Melanesia nowadays. The fulfilment theory can be usefully applied, also, in further stages of the gospel proclamation.

Finally, I assume that the proclamation is not only made by words, but also by deeds and examples. Having stated that, let us start with a summary of the main characteristics of Melanesian traditional religions.

### **MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN RELIGIONS**

In primal cultures, it is difficult or impossible to separate religion from culture in general, if by “religion” we mean beliefs and practices directed of beings not to be found in mankind’s common experience. In fact, traditional Melanesian religions permeated the whole life of the communities. For instance, people would not engage in hunting, fishing, planting, or go out fighting without first calling on supernatural help through religious rituals. Initiation rites were also accompanied by magico-religious practices. It is only because of the nature of this paper that the author tries to extract religious aspects from the more-general Melanesian cultures.

A summary of some major characteristics of traditional Melanesian religions is presented in Chart 1. They are contrasted with the correspondent characteristics of the kind of Christianity preached by the first missionaries, who were mostly north-Europeans (British, German, and French), or descendants from north-Europeans (American and Australian). Their type of Christianity is here called “modern Western Christianity”.

**Chart 1: Some Major Characteristics of Traditional Melanesian Religions, and of Modern Western Christianity**

<b>TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN RELIGIONS</b>	<b>MODERN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY</b>
<b>Integrated worldview</b> No separation between the natural and supernatural realms: gods, spirits, ancestors, men, and animals, all of which inhabit the same cosmos, and interact with each other.	<b>Dualistic worldview</b> Separation of the natural and supernatural; only exceptionally does the supernatural interact with the natural world; scepticism concerning vision, dreams, miracles, etc.

<p><b>Pre-scientific attitudes</b> Natural phenomena are attributed to supernatural causes; importance of magical techniques to control natural phenomena. Belief in sorcery as explanation for sickness, death and disaster.</p>	<p><b>Scientific attitudes</b> Natural phenomena are due to natural causes, which are discovered with the help of experiment; magical practices are not considered effective.</p>
<p><b>Clannish dimension</b> Beliefs differ according to the clan, and so do rites, ancestors, spirits, taboos, and moral codes.</p>	<p><b>Universalistic dimension</b> Christianity promulgates doctrines, rites, and a moral code applying to the whole human race.</p>
<p><b>Communitarian</b> Relations with the supernatural world are community-centred; the moral code is based on the welfare of the community.</p>	<p><b>Individualistic</b> Relations with the supernatural are individual and personal; the moral code is based on the salvation of each individual person.</p>
<p><b>Holistic</b> Religious beliefs and rituals permeate the whole life. No activity is only secular.</p>	<p><b>Compartmental</b> Clear division between secular activities and religious ones.</p>
<p><b>Immanent</b> Creative deities are immanent, but not involved in the life of humans. Nature and ancestors' spirits are immanent and involved. Presence of "dema" figures.</p>	<p><b>Transcendent</b> Creator is one and transcendent, benevolent and provident. Spirits and ghosts are also transcendent. Only exceptionally, they interfere with humans.</p>
<p><b>Based on veneration of the spirits</b> Nature spirits, and spirits of the ancestors (ghosts) are venerated, and considered powerful.</p>	<p><b>Limited veneration of spirits</b> Only the angelic spirits are venerated.</p>
<p><b>Magical</b> It is believed that wealth and benefits, as well as sickness and disaster, can be obtained by means of rites and spells, which have automatic effects when correctly used by magicians.</p>	<p><b>Trusting on prayer</b> The divinity cannot be forced by magical rites and spells. It can only be asked in prayer, in the confidence of being heard.</p>

<p><b>Pragmatic</b> Religion is all about attaining practical and immediate ends: hunting, fishing, healing, rain, fertility, sickness, death, etc. Rites are changed if they do not work. The highest aim is fullness of life here on earth.</p>	<p><b>Non-pragmatic</b> Religion is primarily concerned with the attainment of spiritual ends: pardon for sin, eternal life, strength to practice the commandments, etc. Rites are more stable.</p>
<p><b>Ritualistic</b> There are all sorts of rites to obtain the desired result; great importance is placed on the exact execution of rites, and on their being done by experts.</p>	<p><b>Non-ritualistic</b> Rites, especially among Protestants, are reduced to the minimum, and are considered more to be symbols of inner attitude than actions invested with their own power.</p>
<p><b>Based on reciprocity</b> Relations with the non-empirical world are of the same type of those between humans, based on systems of exchange. Punishment is seen as the consequence of a faulty or failed exchange. Vengeance and pay back are a moral obligation.</p>	<p><b>Based on grace</b> Relations with God are based on His free, gratuitous, condescension. Redemption and eternal salvation are freely given. Forgiveness and reconciliation are stressed.</p>
<p><b>Indigenous moral code</b> The highest principle of morality is the welfare of one's own clan, but there are countless rules to observe: taboos, dietary requirements, fear of menstrual blood, strict observance of rituals, etc.</p>	<p><b>Western-Christian moral code</b> Monogamy, free choice in marriage, gender equality, courts to resolve conflicts, individual rights, abolition of tribal fighting, universal brotherhood of mankind, code of modesty, etc.</p>
<p><b>Emotional</b> Festivals, initiation rites, funerals, myths, etc., are celebrated with great emotional intensity; ecstatic phenomena are keenly sought after.</p>	<p><b>Self-restraint</b> The participants in rituals should be calm and orderly; scepticism with regard to ecstatic phenomena.</p>
<p><b>Esoteric</b> Secrecy is essential about rites, myths, etc., if these are not to lose their effectiveness; only initiates are supposed to have the knowledge, or full knowledge, of them.</p>	<p><b>Transparent</b> Everything will be spoken about and explained; religious knowledge is open to anyone; the content of faith and rituals are explained.</p>

<b>Oral</b> Religious knowledge is transmitted orally to the appropriate people. Myths are always open to adaptation to changing social and environmental circumstances.	<b>Written</b> Tradition is written down, and it is not subject to creeping or unnoticed change; especially in the case of the Bible or other holy books.
<b>Millenarian</b> Many Melanesian myths foresee the sudden irruption of a golden age, involving the return of the ancestors.	<b>Non-millenarian</b> Many Christian denominations do not emphasise the parousia, the second coming of Christ.

Source: Zocca, 2007: pp. 150-152.

### **BRIEF EXCURSUS ON THE EVANGELISATION OF MELANESIA**

The first attempts in the evangelisation of Melanesia were sporadic. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese ships that plied a regular trans-Pacific route from South America and the Central Americas to the Moluccas and return, usually had religious personnel on board. From time to time, local islanders would be taken on board and transported to places like the Spanish Americas to be Christianised there, and to return as evangelisers of their own people. But these Catholic efforts were without fruit in Melanesia.

It wasn't until the late 18th century that Christian missionaries began a serious evangelisation effort in Polynesia, which reached Melanesia a few decades later. With the exception of the Indonesian Province of Papua – which was first evangelised by missionaries coming from Java – the Pacific evangelisation spread from east to the west. Protestant missionaries, sent by mission agencies, mostly located in Europe and Australia, arrived first, and made use of indigenous Christians in spreading the Good News to other islands. They reached Fiji in 1830, New Caledonia and Vanuatu in 1840, the Solomon Islands in 1845, and Eastern New Guinea (the present Papua New Guinea) in 1871. Protestant missionaries had already reached Western New Guinea (the present Indonesian Papua) by 1855. The founding Protestant denominations were Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, and Adventist.

On the part of the Catholic church, the evangelisation of Oceania was first entrusted by the Vatican to religious orders of recent formation, such as the French *Society of Mary*, the Italian *Pontifical Institute of Mission Overseas* (PIME), the French *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, the French *Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*, and the German *Society of the Divine Word*. Catholic missionaries arrived in New Caledonia in 1843, in Fiji in 1844, in the Solomon Islands in 1845, in Eastern New Guinea in 1847, in Vanuatu in 1848, in Western New Guinea in 1912.

Enormous difficulties, and heavy loss of personnel, accompanied the evangelisation of Melanesia. Mission stations often had to be abandoned, due to the hostility of the local populations, or to infections and epidemics. Many foreign missionaries suffered from a violent, or early, death. The evangelisation of Melanesia did not happen as smoothly as that of Polynesia, and also suffered severe setbacks during the First and Second World Wars. In spite of all that, by the mid-20th century, most Melanesians had been “converted” to Christianity. Starting from the 1960s onwards, many Protestant missions became autonomous churches, while the previous Catholic Apostolic Vicariates became autonomous dioceses.

After the Second World War, many new Protestant denominations entered the Melanesian region, as well as male and female Catholic religious orders. The pioneering churches found their ranks being thinned by the success of the newly-arrived, and the scene of religious affiliation was changed significantly. It is estimated that, in Melanesia, during the last 50 years, a good quarter of the faithful of the pioneering churches had transferred their allegiance to recently-arrived churches. Percentages differ, according to the country, but the overall tendency is clear, and seems destined to increase. From the data collected by the Melanesian Institute Research Team in 2003, the following was the situation of Melanesia as a whole in the matter of religious affiliation at the turn of the second into the third millennium.

**Table 1: Religious Affiliation in Melanesia (2003)**

CHURCH/ RELIGION	Indonesian Papua	Papua New Guinea	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu	New Caledonia	Fiji	TOTAL
Catholic	450,000 18.4%	1,500,000 27.3%	85,000 17.3%	28,000 13.3%	112,000 50.9%	70,000 8.2%	2,245,000 26.2%
Calvinist (1)	79,000 32.2%	***	***	64,000 30.5%	47,700 21.7%	500 0.06%	902,200 9.3%
Methodist (2)	***	630,000 11.5%	49,000 11.5%	***	***	300,000 25.7%	979,000 10.1%
Lutheran (3)	***	920,000 16.7%	***	***	***	***	920,000 9.5%
Anglican	***	175,000 3.2%	155,000 28.2%	28,800 13.7%	***	7,000 0.8%	365,800 3.8%
Baptist (4)	90,000 3.7%	135,000 2.5%	2,500 0.5%	***	***	2,000 0.2%	229,500 2.4%
Evangelical (5)	345,000 14.1%	350,000 6.4%	85,000 17.3%	8,900 4.2%	***	20,000 2.4%	808,900 8.3%
Adventist (6)	12,000 0.5%	600,000 11.0%	55,000 12.2%	28,000 13.3%	460 0.2%	22,000 3.2%	717,460 7.4%
Apostolic (7)	***	120,000 2.2%	2,000 0.4%	3,900 0.9%	100 0.05%	3,000 0.4%	129,000 1.3%
Pentecostal (8)	27,000 1.1%	500,000 9.1%	10,000 2.0%	22,600 10.8%	3,100 1.4%	35,000 4.8%	597,700 6.2%
Mormons (9)	***	23,000 0.4%	250 0.05%	2,100 1.0%	1,900 0.9%	4,000 0.5%	31,250 0.3%
Jehovah's Witnesses	***	24,000 0.4%	9,000 1.8%	400 0.2%	1,660 0.8%	7,000 0.8%	42,060 0.4%
Other Christian (10)	127,500 5.2%	407,000 7.4%	22,250 4.5%	15,000 7.1%	***	16,500 2.0%	588,650 6.1%
<b>Total Christian</b>	<b>1,841,500 75.2%</b>	<b>5,384,400 97.9%</b>	<b>475,000 96.9%</b>	<b>201,700 96.0%</b>	<b>166,920 75.8%</b>	<b>487,000 58.0%</b>	<b>8,556,530 88.1%</b>

CHURCH/ RELIGION	Indonesian Papua	Papua New Guinea	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu	New Caledonia	Fiji	TOTAL
Baha'i	***	18,000 0.3%	3,000 0.7%	2,000 1.0%	800 0.4%	1,000 0.1%	24,800 0.2%
Muslim	600,000 24.5%	1,000 0.02%	***	100 0.05%	5,500 2.5%	64,000 7.6%	670,600 6.9%
Hindu	4,000 0.2%	600 0.01%	***	120 0.05%	***	275,000 32.7%	279,720 2.9%
Buddhist	2,000 0.1%	1,000 0.02%	***	***	200 0.1%	***	3,200 0.03%
Other religions (11)	***	15,000 0.3%	5,000 1.0%	***	***	5,000 0.6%	25,000 0.3%
Traditional Religions (12)	***	50,000 0.9%	2,000 0.4%	5,500 2.6%	***	***	57,500 0.6%
Other non- Christian (13)	2,500 0.1%	30,000 0.5%	5,000 1.0%	1,680 0.8%	46,580 21.3%	8,000 1.0%	92,860 1.0%
<b>TOTAL NON- CHRISTIAN</b>	<b>608,500 24.8%</b>	<b>115,600 2.1%</b>	<b>15,000 3.1%</b>	<b>8,300 4.0%</b>	<b>53,080 24.4%</b>	<b>353,000 42.0%</b>	<b>1,153,680 11.9%</b>
<b>TOTAL POPULATION</b>	<b>2,450,000 100.0%</b>	<b>5,500,000 100.0%</b>	<b>490,000 100.0%</b>	<b>210,000 100.0%</b>	<b>220,000 100.0%</b>	<b>840,000 100.0%</b>	<b>9,710,000 100.0%</b>

\*\*\* Not available, not offered.

- (1) *Calvinists*: Presbyterians, Christian Evangelical Church in Indonesia, Union of Reformed churches, Evangelical Church of New Caledonia, Free Evangelical Church of New Caledonia, Protestant Church of Indonesia in Papua, etc.
- (2) *Methodists*: Methodist church, United church of PNG, United church of Solomon Islands, Wesleyan Methodist church, etc.
- (3) *Lutherans*: Evangelical Lutheran church of PNG, Gutnius Lutheran church, Melpa Lutheran church, Church of the Protestant Community in Papua.
- (4) *Baptists*: Baptist Bible Fellowship, Maranatha Baptist church, Baptist Unions, Sovereign Grace Baptist Union, Tabernacle church, Independent Baptist church, etc.
- (5) *Evangelicals*: Evangelical Church in Indonesia, Evangelical Church of the Tabernacle, Christian Community of the Bible, Church of Christ, South Sea Evangelical church, etc.
- (6) *Adventists*: Seventh-day Adventist church, Reformed Adventist church.
- (7) *Apostolic*: Apostolic church, New Apostolic church.
- (8) *Pentecostals*: Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Church of Bethel, United Pentecostal church, Four Square Gospel church, etc.
- (9) *Mormons*: Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, Reformed Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.
- (10) *Other Christian churches*: Independent indigenous churches, Eastern Orthodox, smaller churches not federated or affiliated, etc.
- (11) *Other religions*: Confucianism, Sikhs, modern orientalising sects, etc.
- (12) *Traditional religions*: Both the really-traditional ones, and the more-modern, usually messianic versions.
- (13) *Other non-Christian*: Atheists, agnostics, not members of any institutionalised church.

Source: Zocca, 2007, pp. 197-198.

## **ATTEMPT AT AN IDEAL PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL IN MELANESIA**

The following attempt is based on the already exposed “fulfilment theory”. The initial proclamation of Christ should be presented in the first instance as a “completion” of beliefs and practices already present in traditional Melanesian cultures and religions.

The following are some suggestions in that direction.

- Belief in Creator deities, sometimes in a supreme Spirit, was almost universally present. Monotheism and creationism could be adapted into that belief.
- The integrated vision of the world could facilitate the acceptance of a provident God-Father, who is close to His children, and cares for their well-being.
- Belief in good and bad spirits was also universally present. The doctrine of angels and demons could fit into it.
- Belief in the existence of souls, and their permanence after the death of a person was held by all Melanesians. New teaching would have been that the fate of the ancestors' souls was now completely in God's hands.
- The myths regarding the "*dema*" convey the principle that the death of one person brings life to the community. A profound insight, which can easily be applied to Jesus and His death. To the search for a fullness of life here on earth could be added the search for a fullness of life beyond the grave (cf. John 10:10).
- The communitarian society, in which the well-being of all takes priority over the individual interest, could become a concrete image of an ideal "body of Christ".
- Leaders, who acquire their status because of the services provided to their people, are also a good example of that leadership as service, proclaimed in the gospel.
- The need of rituals for different activities and initiation should also have been recognised, and taken into consideration, in providing Christian rituals, or adapting the old ones. Several sacraments, such as initiation rituals, could easily fit into Melanesian cultures.
- The authority attributed to the mythological stories, handed down by the ancestors, could also have easily been transferred to God's word in the Bible.

- Beliefs surrounding the veneration of the ancestors could be applied to the veneration of saints as well.
- The attitude of “awe” and taboo in regard to magic things and places could be transferred to Christian holy books, rituals, and places.

As already said, this kind of approach presupposes a deep knowledge of Melanesian cultures, on the part of the proclaimers. The same knowledge is also needed to oppose and correct beliefs and practices, which are in clear contrast with the Christian message. To mention some:

- The blaming of sorcerers and witches for sickness, death, and disasters, followed by accusations and punishments.
- The pay-back mentality, which sees forgiveness as weakness.
- Easy harming and killing of supposed enemies.
- The low status of women, who are easily abused.
- The prestigious status enjoyed in the society by polygynous men
- The fear of ancestral ghosts.
- Resorting to tribal fights in order to resolve conflicts.

These bad habits, too, should be corrected, beginning with their cultural roots. For instance, accusations and punishments of supposed sorcerers are rooted in the belief of the effectiveness of magical practices, and in the non-acceptance of natural causes as final explanations for natural phenomena. They could be corrected by education, exposure to modern medicine, and appropriate legislation.<sup>10</sup> Pay-back mentality could be corrected by presenting the advantages of peaceful living, and the sacredness of human life.

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<sup>10</sup> In Papua New Guinea, there is a “Sorcery Act”, which criminalises the practice of malevolent sorcery. According to the author, this Act is rather reinforcing the belief, instead of taking it away.

Nowadays, the almost all of the indigenous inhabitants of Melanesia call themselves Christian. It seems, therefore, that the phase of initial proclamation should be over, at least for the adult people. Unfortunately, this is not the case, since many important values, proclaimed by Christ, have not yet been internalised, and made their own, by Melanesians.

Besides, apart from the traditional customs not yet transformed by the Christian message, there are many new customs, which are strongly in contrast with Christian ethics, such as corruption, abuse of alcohol and drugs, prostitution, gambling, pornography, and other crimes of various type. Secularisation and agnosticism, especially among young, educated Melanesians, are also affecting the modern population. We now experience a certain amount of no-churched youth and adults. Melanesian cultures and peoples are still in need of conversion, prompted by an ever-deeper understanding and acceptance of the gospel of Christ. The above list of suggestions for the proclamation of the gospel might still be useful in the present context, and in the transmission of the Christian faith to the younger generation.

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