

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 20

Volume 20 • Number 3 • July 1996

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

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M. Van der Raaij, a student at the Bible College of New Zealand, Auckland, wrote this article as a class assignment for Dr. John Roxborough, Professor of Missions at BCNZ. p. 240

Indigenization as Incarnation: The Concept of a Melanesian Christ

Joe Gaqurae

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All Melanesians experience colonialism politically and religiously. The present political and religious stage in every country is the product of efforts made by the colonizers. Foreign countries have put into these countries much money and manpower for the sake of development. For this, Melanesians are thankful.

Melanesians were and are a religious people. Traditional religions play an important role in the people's spiritual affairs and the total life of the community. Ancient Melanesians were not stupid people as we often think. They were a religious, clever and capable people. They knew what was right and what was wrong according to their particular society's recognized standard.

Western missionaries had experienced a new kind of religion, namely Christianity. They felt that they had to share this religion with others. Therefore they came to the Melanesian countries with an urgent gospel. Christianity came with western civilization. Political colonizers and missionaries arrived at about the same time. Thus Christianity was seen as the colonizing race's religion. At times, local people saw Christianity as identical with western imperialism. Although Christianity has done a lot to reform

Melanesian society, certain people are now questioning its destructive orientation. As well as making good contributions, it has destroyed much that could have been preserved.

Melanesians are now entering a new era: 'the era of independence'. As Melanesians are liberated and develop, a critical consciousness is born. This consciousness grows as more and more people are being educated secularly and religiously. The more they are educated, the more they look back to their own cultural heritage, which has been ignored. They start to question whether their traditional cultures have any value for the present and the future. They question the sort of attitudes and actions taken by missionaries p. 241 towards their culture. The reactions that come from this critical consciousness are both positive and negative. Some now want to return to their traditional cultures and religions. They want to get rid of everything foreign in these countries. This is a threat to Christianity. Others, however, want to see that Christianity is indigenized. They want to see that their good cultural values are revived. Generally, many do not find Christianity relevant and call it 'foreign religion' or 'white man's religion'. This situation certainly calls for attention. Christian Melanesians need their own apologetics. It is their task to defend Christianity as a religion for Melanesia. They need to say that Christianity is not a foreign religion. But they also need to ask why people call present Christianity foreign. This is the task of indigenization. Perhaps Melanesians will not attempt to defend every part of present Christianity as seen and interpreted by foreigners. It is now time for Melanesian Christians to read the Bible and interpret it in a way that speaks to the present situation in Melanesia. They are to rely on the living Christ who is here in the situation through the Holy Spirit as interpreter. The views and opinions of foreigners should be respected, but they should not be worshipped or taken as the final measuring stick.

Therefore there is a need for a relevant theology or theologies for Melanesia. This is what the writer calls 'an indigenous Christian theology'.

INDIGENIZATION AS INCARNATION

The theological understanding of indigenization is based on the Christian doctrine of incarnation. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father' ([Jn. 1:14](#)); 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life' ([1 Jn. 1:1](#)). '... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men' ([Philp. 2:6-7](#)). The late Dr. Byang H. Kato writes:

The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptations. The incarnation itself is a form of contextualisation. The Son of God condescended to pitch his tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed ([John 1:14](#)). The unapproachable Yahweh whom no one has seen and lived, has become the object of seeing and touching through incarnation ([John 18:9](#); [1 John 1:1](#)). The moving old hymn of humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ the Lord ([Phil 2:5-8](#)) was evidently an incentive to Apostle Paul in his philosophy of the ministry which was to become 'all things to all men'. This in turn should motivate us to make the Gospel relevant in every situation everywhere as long as the Gospel is not compromised.¹

The reconciling mission of God was p. 242 achieved by the incarnation of his Son, culture-bound to a certain extent as a Jew, and a Jew of Galilee, a speaker probably of Galilean

¹ Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, p. 1217.

Aramaic, by occupation a carpenter in the tradition of his earthly father. In Christ, God became culture-bound. He became subject to time-space limitations. If one accepts the incarnation as a fundamental Christian belief, the church which is in Christ's body in this world has to incarnate in Melanesian cultures. Certainly Jesus has his disagreements with the Jewish culture but he could not cease to be a human Jew. In the same way, the church in Melanesia should incarnate in the Melanesian cultures but at the same time bring about necessary reformation. Indigenization respects and appreciates the local cultures just as Jesus Christ enjoyed Jewish culture. In Melanesia the church is to be Melanesian but at the same time Christian. Indigenization does not tolerate those who rubbish local cultures as if they were all bad. It appreciates the good elements of God's gifts and tries hard to work through them and reach the hearts of men with the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

The church at present needs to empty itself of all the unnecessary elements of western heritage and pitch its tent in Melanesia. It needs to adapt itself to the cultural life of Melanesians, speak their languages and listen to their particular needs. Only through incarnation can that reformation effectively take place in any situation. The church needs to identify itself with this culture but at the same time maintain its true nature and reform it. It has to have special distinctive marks of Melanesian-ness.

Indigenization as incarnation raises a Christological issue. A theology of indigenization is basically an incarnational theology. Thus it is to be based on the biblical doctrine of incarnation. It is to be centred on the incarnated Christ.

Dr A. R. Tippet points out that a church is indigenous 'when the indigenous people of a community think of the Lord as their own, not a foreign Christ'.² Unfortunately Dr Tippet does not spell out clearly what he means. If Christ is not to be a foreign Christ then he must be a Melanesian Christ. To be my own, Christ must be a Melanesian Christ. This is important because it is our belief that there is a relationship between Christ and the Christians. How can this relationship be understood in Melanesia? It may be helpful if we first look at the people's concept of Christ and the Christians. How can this relationship be understood in Christ today? Local people certainly have some images of Christ in their minds.

PEOPLE'S IMAGES OF CHRIST

Certain Melanesians in the village setting have been asking the following questions: Who is Jesus Christ? What is the colour of his skin? What does he look like? What do you understand about Christ? Generally, most of them think of Jesus Christ as a white man—a European. A small proportion of them think of him as a Jew, but describe him generally as a **P. 243** white person. He is tall and fat. He has a beard and hair like the missionaries. He wears a long robe. He is clever and rich like the white missionaries. He gives power and knowledge to Christians, but not money. Melanesians have not got any ancestors like this. An old man said to the author: 'The reason why white people are very clever and rich is that Jesus, their ancestor, was the cleverest person who ever lived on this planet'. How did people get such ideas? It is hard to say. The thing that strikes one here is that Christ has been conceptualized as a white person, a foreigner. People have a distorted concept of Christ. How much of this distortion has been contributed by missionaries is an interesting question. The conclusion the local people have drawn from this concept is that the white race is a superior race. The white people are more spiritual and more clever—the 'know-alls'. They can never make mistakes. They are clean whereas the local people

² Tippet, *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory*, p. 158.

are dirty, stupid and limited in knowledge. Some local people even think that God is closer to white people than to them. Thus Melanesians have a very strong feeling of inferiority.

Also linked up with this idea of the foreign-ness of Christ is the idea that missionaries brought Christ to Melanesia. Certain missionaries encouraged the notion through their preaching that Christ was not here until the pioneer missionaries came. Therefore God was thought to have abandoned this part of the world. This was the basis of the belief that Melanesian cultures were full of sin and evil. One is tempted to argue at this point for the fact that Christ or God was here even before the missionaries. God created the world, including Melanesia. It is hard therefore to believe that God had abandoned this part of the world until the missionaries came. God was here preparing the peoples and cultures towards fulfilment in Christ. Missionaries were not bringers of God to Melanesia. They were in fact bringers and revealers (or better witnesses) of what God has done in their own parts of the world. They were witnesses to a unique experience.

What can we do to correct the distorted concept of Christ in Melanesia? A Christian Melanesian theologian must develop his own apologetics. He must defend Christianity against those who accuse it of foreign-ness. His task as a theologian is to confirm that Christ is neither white nor foreign. Thus he cannot avoid saying that Christ is a Melanesian Christ. He is Melanesian. Just as the early fathers considered him the 'Logos of God', for the Greek mind, we need to say that he is the Melanesian Christ. This is indigenization. Therefore the theology of indigenization raises a Christological issue based on the Christian doctrine of incarnation.

CHRIST THE MELANESIAN

The first attempt at indigenizing the concept of Christ in recent years was made by black American theologians. Dr James H. Cone argues that in the American black context Christ is black. When this was first voiced, the whole world was shocked, **P. 244** especially the western Christians and theologians; it was syncretistic and blasphemous to many of the faithful Christians of the West. 'Christ cannot be black', they said. After some years, people came to realize that black theologians have made a vast contribution to Christian theology, especially in our understanding of the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection. Their theology is an indigenous theology in black America. It is situational and local. This perhaps teaches something to those who for so long confused theology with the gospel. These indigenous theologians want to say that theology is not the gospel, and the gospel is not theology. Theology is not universal but the gospel is. Theology is the local interpretation of the universal gospel.

The author wants to advocate the idea of the Melanesian Christ. This is not an intellectual exercise but a pastoral concern. It is unfortunate that Christ has been conceptualized as a white person and a foreigner in many places, despite many sermons on the fact that he was a Jew. Christ cannot be separated from the white person in the thinking of many people. This is a form of heresy and must be uprooted if we want Christianity to take root in Melanesia. This is not syncretistic or blasphemous. If we think this is blasphemous, then why do we preach the Greek concept of Christ as the Logos of God?

Many people believe that no one can localize the concept of Christ because he is supracultural. This cannot be true because the incarnation proves that the supracultural was localized in Bethlehem. He was culturalized in Jewish culture. More than that, it is because Christ is universal that Melanesians can see him localized. If he is not universal, localization is an impossibility.

What do we mean by the phrase 'Melanesian Christ'? First we do not intend to water down the fact that historically he was a Jew. He would still remain as a historical figure for reference. A point that we may want to affirm is that he was a Jew but in humanity he shared certain characteristics which a Melanesian also shares with the Jewish race. As far as common human characteristics are concerned, Christ was both a Jew and a Melanesian. A Melanesian is not a Jew but he is also not entirely different from him. They are both human beings created in the image of God ([Gen. 1:26](#)). Both are sinners and in need of salvation ([Rom. 3:23](#)).

Second, we do not attempt to make Christ become a Melanesian. We cannot make him a Melanesian. He is already a Melanesian. The incarnation affirms the fact that he is already a Melanesian. He has been indigenized or localized by God himself. We cannot do what already has been done. We only have to recognize the fact. We just have to wake up to the fact that through incarnation Christ has already incarnated and identified himself with the whole of humankind, not only Jews. Third, it is not the pigmentation of skin that we are concerned with, but Melanesian human-ness. As far as pigmentation of skin is concerned, he was a Jew. The concern is that in the Melanesian eye of faith, Christ must be a Melanesian. If it was possible for Christ to become a Jew, what can stop him from becoming a Melanesian to me? If this is impossible [p. 245](#) and blasphemous then the incarnation is a false story and has no meaning for a Melanesian.

What is the concept that Christ is the Melanesian Christ?

1. We have already mentioned that the basic evidence is the doctrine of incarnation ([In. 1:1ff](#); [Philp. 2:5-8](#)). Christ became a human being. He was literally a Jew, but shared many common human characteristics with other races, including the Melanesian race. In this respect he was also a Melanesian. He was already the Melanesian Christ. It is only in this sense that a Melanesian can say with the writer of Hebrews, 'For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning' ([Heb. 4:15](#)). Christ was the Melanesian Christ who knew Melanesians in the very depth of their hearts. He experienced their experiences and suffered their sufferings.

2. The resurrection of Christ: We believe that the living Christ lives in Melanesia as well as in Australia and New Zealand. This Christ is the same Christ who incarnated as a human being—the Melanesian. If it is true that he rose from the dead and lives here, then he is the Melanesian Christ. He is not a foreigner but a native of this land. A foreign Christ will be a stranger in Melanesia. He will not understand Melanesian people fully. He will not experience their suffering and pains. He will be a Christ who has no culture here. Therefore the resurrected Christ is the Melanesian Christ in this situation: a Christ who is neither remote nor an outsider.

3. Christ the neighbour: The concept that the living Christ is the Melanesian Christ leads to the idea that a Christian is a Christ to his or her neighbour. We probably do not mean that this man or woman is the Christ. Nor do we want to multiply Christ. What we mean is that here is a close identification between Christ and Christian. The Spirit in us is Christ living with us. We meet Christ in our neighbours. He comes to us through them. In this sense, our neighbour is Christ coming to us. Therefore in Melanesia, our Melanesian brother or sister is the Melanesian Christ coming to us.

It is interesting to see that the New Testament writers have no fear of presenting Christ as the one who identifies himself with people. In the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, Christ is presented as saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, You did it to me' ([Mt. 25:40](#)). In [Acts 9](#) Paul persecuted the Christians. But Jesus said: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' Christ identifies himself with the Christians under persecution. In [Matthew 18:5](#) he said, 'Whoever

receives one such child in my name receives me'. He identifies himself with children. In Melanesia then the Melanesian Christ identifies himself with the Melanesian Christians, Melanesian children and the Melanesian people as a whole. This is the wonderful gospel. It is true that Melanesians in general are not perfect but they are not completely imperfect either. In the same way the Jewish race and humanity as a whole were neither perfect nor [p. 246](#) imperfect when Christ incarnated. But Christ through his love is prepared to identify himself with Melanesians.

In saying that Christ is the Melanesian, we do not deny his sovereignty, as some think. The contrary is true. By doing this we uplift him as the Christ of all people. Only through my experience of him as my personal Christ (Melanesian Christ) can I admire the fact that he is the Christ for all peoples. Christ's incarnation does not deny his sovereignty at all. Instead it uplifts it. Christ remains supracultural in quality but incarnates so that people will be able to understand him more concretely. In the same way, he has to incarnate in Melanesia so that Melanesians will understand him more fully as their personal Lord and Saviour.

Christ is to be seen as a tribesman as far as relationships are concerned, the person who shares and knows his people more than a foreigner possibly can, the person who understands their cultures and helps them to develop. Calling him a tribesman may give someone the impression that Christ is confined. This is not true because Christ cannot be confined to anyone or anything. He is still universal, but his relationships with people of different cultures can be meaningful only when Christ is seen as the local person of that society. A foreigner cannot be the ideal person in any society; he must be a tribesman.

One may think that the danger of this is that Christ will become every Melanesian. This can happen, but is not inevitable. The fact that he was a Jew does not mean that he was every Jew. He was a single Jew—the ideal Jew, a different Jew because he had the very nature of God in his human form. Therefore in saying that he is a Melanesian we do not mean he is every Melanesian. He is a different Melanesian—the ideal Melanesian. The Melanesian Christ. The ideal.

4. Christ the creator: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God' ([In. 1:1](#)). 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him' ([Col. 1:15, 16](#)). Melanesian Christians believe that God was the creator of Melanesian countries because he is the creator of the world. God was here even before the arrival of Christianity. He continually worked and transformed the primal societies. Therefore they believe also that Christ was, is and will be in Melanesia. He is the Christ of Melanesia because it was through him and for him that the Melanesian world was created. If it is true that he is the creator of the Melanesian world, then no one will doubt that he is the Melanesian Christ who lived, is living and will always live in Melanesia. He loves the whole world, including Melanesia, so much so that he gave his own life for our salvation. What a wonderful Melanesian Saviour!

This attempt to localize the concept of Christ in Melanesia is basically a pastoral concern. If it is not taken seriously, Christ will always remain an abstract figure and a white [p. 247](#) man in the thinking of many people. He will remain remote and have no relevance for Melanesians. If Christianity is a Christ-centred religion then its relevance in Melanesia will largely depend on the 'Melanesian Christ theology'. This theology's primary task is to define the Melanesian-Christ relationship. How does the Melanesian see Christ in his cultural setting?

The concept of the 'Melanesian Christ' is not without dangers and disadvantages. It is conscious of its inadequacy. But we need to remember that no theology (western or Melanesian) is ever without dangers and inadequacy. p. 248

Evangelism: Some Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives

Paul Weston

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I

EVANGELISM: ITS DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Right at the start we note from our English word 'evangelism' an integral connection between the gospel itself (the evangel) and the process by which it is passed on. However, 'evangelism', is not strictly a biblical word at all.

It is derived from three related biblical words: *euangelisasthai*—a verb occurring 52 times in the NT meaning 'to announce good news', *euangelion* the noun (occurring 72 times) referring to the good news which is announced, and the noun *euangelistes* (occurring 3 times¹)—meaning the one who brings the good news, i.e., the evangelist in person.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary takes this background at face value when it defines evangelism as 'the preaching of the gospel'. The root of the word (evangel) is understood as the content of what is preached (from the Gk. noun), whilst the suffix 'ism' is understood as 'the act of preaching, explaining, or spreading it'.

Evangelism and Words

There are of course numerous definitions of evangelism, and I do not particularly want to add to them. Suffice it to say that the NT gives grounds for establishing that what sets evangelism apart from wider concepts of 'mission' is that it involves the use of language. Biblical evangelism takes place where the gospel is explained or declared.

To be sure the *context* of such an explanation will happen in a variety of different ways for different people, and for the great majority the means by which such words become possible will be *via* relationships expressing love and care within the local community.² In this sense p. 249 evangelism and what has become known rather clumsily as 'social

¹ [Acts 21:18](#); [Eph. 4:11](#); [2 Tim. 4:5](#).

² See John Finney's important study of 500 conversion stories (*Finding Faith Today: How does it happen?*, Bible Society, Swindon 1992) for the importance of relationships in the process of conversion.