

EDITORIAL: INTRODUCING MJT

Sir John Guise, in his *Times of Papua New Guinea* column “The Last Word”, wrote recently (February 17, 1985) of the religious divisions caused in Papua New Guinea by “the inflow of numerous Christian sects, mostly originating from a prominent foreign country which unfortunately has created disunity, antagonism, and bad feelings among village communities and families and against the established churches, where, once upon a time, there was peace and goodwill.” In search of a solution to the twin problems of religious harmony and national unity, he proposed: “How about the creation of a Melanesian theology, which may eventually emerge since the people of this country, before the coming of the missionaries, already believed in many Christian concepts, such as (a) spiritual world, (b) the art of forgiveness among families and communities, etc., etc.”

Whether or not “a national Melanesian church governed by a Melanesian theology may be the answer,” as Sir John suggests, is a proposition many will, no doubt, want to debate. But the call for Melanesian Christians to determine their own indigenous expression of their Christian faith is timely as we introduce this first journal of theology by and for Melanesians.

Has the time indeed come for Melanesians to carry on serious theological discussion in their own right? On the answer to this question depends the success or failure of this new venture by the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS): to launch a journal for the specific purpose of developing indigenous theology in Melanesia. The present executive of MATS, which consists entirely of Melanesians, decided on this momentous step while meeting in Lae in March, 1984. Coupled with this decision was the refusal to wait for the possible revival of the *Pacific Journal of Theology*, but to go it alone and create something characteristically Melanesian, while participating in the “Pacific Theology”, which is slowly but surely emerging.

The Melanesian Institute in Goroka has kindly offered us the use of its typesetting and editorial facilities to begin producing *MJT*. This in itself

should be enough to dispel the impression, which is bound to arise, that *MJT* is an unnecessary duplication of *Catalyst*, which, over the years, has provided a forum for many a debate on the foundations and shape of Melanesian theology, and has published the work of many a Melanesian writer. Implicit in the MATS decision, however, is that the time has come for differentiation of roles, and specialisation of tasks: *MJT* is envisaged as complementary to *Catalyst*, because it is to concentrate on theology in all its manifold aspects, from exegesis to doctrine, including worship and evangelisation, ethics and pastoral practice, with emphasis on the thoughts and feelings of Melanesians as they struggle to map out the intellectual structure of a theology for their unique situation. It is taken for granted that these efforts will draw on the already existing oral sources of indigenous theology in Melanesia, whether in Pidgin or in local languages: the stories and songs, the adaptations of myths, the solutions to practical problems found by prayer and consensus. The only new thing, really, will be that these rich resources will be transposed into the literary medium, thus enabling Pacific-wide discussion by the spokespersons of the Christian community, its theologians. This, of course, entails the use of English, which is both a barrier and a medium: it hinders by its foreignness, but it facilitates by its universality. This dilemma is faced by all third-world theologians.

This first issue of *MJT* contains papers and discussions from the Sixth Study Institute of MATS held at Lae on March 19-24, 1984, on the theme: "Melanesian Theology: Melanesian Theologians at Work". Dr Yeow Choo Lak, of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology in Singapore, who participated in the last round of MATS accreditation visits, gives a gracious introduction to the sister organisation of the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia. There follows some initial attempts to sketch the method of a Melanesian theology (Miria, Hagesi, Tavoia), some examples of what it might look like, both in prospect and in reality (Tuza), and a masterly exposition of some of the inter-cultural and linguistic problems involved (Pech). Also included is a symposium in which the whole problem of the contextualisation of indigenous theologies is raised (Richardson, May, Tuza).

Vigorous responses to these, and all subsequent, contributions to *MJT* are heartily encouraged by the editors! The journal is intended primarily as a forum for the discussion of new ideas rather than a repository for academic set pieces or an official organ of the churches, though we also hope that it will provide a medium for publishing excerpts from theses and essays written at MATS member schools, and significant documents emanating from churches, institutes or faculties. We welcome shorter contributions and letters as well as reports on conferences in the Pacific region. We intend to publish regular book reviews, with special relevance to Melanesia, particularly on third-world theological themes.

With generous support from Melanesian writers and readers, whose numbers are admittedly still relatively few, supplemented by expatriates resident in these islands, and interested scholars overseas, *MJT* could become an indispensable tool for theological discussion and research in the Pacific. We are still a long way from realising this vision. But the need for a community of theological discourse, a forum for critical collaboration in Melanesia is becoming urgent. The full responsibility – and loneliness – of national independence and church autonomy is beginning to dawn on Melanesians, just as the problems confronting them from within and without become daunting. Expatriate experts cannot provide answers to the questions Melanesian Christians are asking deep in their hearts as they face these challenges. Only Melanesians can formulate these questions; only they can identify those elements in scripture and their various traditions which contribute towards answering them.

Can our fledgling journal bear the weight of responsibility thus foisted upon it? Time will tell. I count it a great privilege to be asked to provide some initial help in carrying out MATS' purpose. May the Creator Spirit, among whose names are Wisdom and Understanding, be with us in our collaborative effort!

John D'Arcy May
Executive Editor.