

DISCUSSION*

While most agreed that there was no point in rejecting Western theology straight out, it was also felt that it cannot be taken for granted as the norm of Melanesian theology. A Melanesian participant doubted that Melanesian theology had reached the stage where it could claim any universal validity. In the end, however, only “insiders” can judge the authenticity of an indigenous theology. Paul Richardson clarified the point that Western culture, even for Melanesians, is not just something to be read about in books, but is borne into their lives by industrialisation, technology, and new forms of social life. He drew a parallel with the present revival of Islam, which may be seen as a reaction to the forces of Westernisation. In Melanesia, too, there is a danger of constructing an artificial Melanesian culture to preserve a sense of identity in the face of Western influences through TV, etc. Again, in 18th century England, the more people became industrialised and urbanised, the more they idealised the simple life of the countryside, and the beauties of nature. “Man made the town, and God made the country!” Will something similar happen in Melanesia?

Rufus Pech reminded us that Melanesians are already engaged in liberation struggles: in East Timor, in Irian Jaya, in New Caledonia. Atrocities are being perpetrated against them, and it is only to be expected that their response will eventually be formulated as some form of Marxist liberation theology. We do not always have an adequate sense of the true extent of “Melanesia”, and of the solidarity to which Melanesians are being called. Kasek Kautil expressed his thankfulness that Melanesians had been able to retain so much of their own cultures. Theologies grow out of people’s experience, just as Western theologies did. Take away the different life styles, whether Western or Melanesian, and you are left with people; and people are more important than theologies! It seemed to him that Melanesians are more “existentialist” than most people think: they live in the present. Actual experience plays a dominant part in their lives.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the “Melanesian” traditions, which a Melanesian theology would draw on, as they exist at present, are already largely shaped by modern life. This makes it all the more urgent to treat the problems of liberation and modernisation theologically, and in a Melanesian way.

Paul Richardson, emphasising that he spoke as an outsider, noted that less and less respect seemed to be shown to the “educated élite” in Papua New Guinea. Why is it not possible to respect one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, despite different cultural influences? Is it because the so-called élite is not showing true leadership? Rufus Pech followed this up by outlining the role the myth of the Two Brothers, which is widespread throughout Melanesia, could play in coping with the present situation, and in providing a source of Melanesian theology. In a society, in which poverty is rearing its head, and accusations of corruption are flying, the theme of “betraying one’s brother” could take on new meaning. Common mythology also means a common religious background. This myth, which inspired many of the so-called “cargo cults”, could once again become an expression of hope in the new context. Realistically, however, we must also reckon with revolutionary movements springing up from the same source at village level against an irresponsible élite.

These more general considerations of the contextualisation of theology in Melanesia became much more immediate in the light of Esau Tuza’s case study of Silas Eto and the Christian Fellowship Church. Examples were given of the taro and shaker cults of Oro Province, participants in which are reported to have said: “When we take part in these activities, we’re not thinking of the ancestors, but of the Holy Spirit.” Can there be such different content under the same outward form? How does one evaluate such phenomena theologically? Does traditional initiation flow through the Pentecostal movement like an underground stream? Esau Tuza was inclined to think that traditional forms can indeed mediate Christian contents, for example, when the Enga

spontaneously compose and sing hymns. Rufus Pech pointed out that this process is not new, but goes back to the very early church.

One aspect of the Christian Fellowship Church that led to further reflection was the unique status of Silas Eto. Rufus Pech reminded us that a church leader who is so strongly accentuated is not without parallel in the history of the church; the pope in Roman Catholicism was mentioned as an example. We often overlook that the creed is not simply Trinitarian, but four-fold: in the fourth profession of faith we say that we believe in the church, for in a sense it “implements” all that God has done in His economy of salvation. And, traditionally, the village community has built up the church – including the material building – in Melanesia, often under the leadership of a sort of “paramount *lului*” (representative of the community). Looked at in this light, is the idea of a “quaternity” really so outlandish? “Four” is just as much a biblical symbol as “three”, and the Holy Spirit always works through people, whether individuals or groups, to mediate salvation. On the other hand, Melanesians generally refuse to limit God to the church; they also respond to the Spirit working outside it. God is invisible, yet He is mediated to us primarily through people.

Some doubted whether Silas Eto actually regarded *himself* as part of the Godhead. Esau Tuza suggested that it is more accurate to say that he saw himself as the temporary embodiment of some aspect of God’s power and activity (see below). It was suggested that the rise of independent churches, as in Africa, might be the beginning of a “third stage” in the history of Christianity, which began as a Jewish sect before becoming a church in its own right; and, again, parallel to Africa, this phenomenon is associated with the availability of the scriptures in the vernacular. Many of these African movements were based on the conviction that “It is time for us Africans to bring back Christianity to the whites!” According to a Melanesian participant, Christian and traditional elements can enter into a

synthesis, but the pragmatic and functional Melanesian view of religion will be one of its ruling principles.

One of Silas Eto's main motives for proceeding as he did was the realisation that his people were not independent economically. He believed in hard work, and a sound economic base, and he personally sweated to establish no less than 15 plantations. True independence, whether for the nation or the church, could come only with economic autonomy. Eto's relatives and successors in the movement have become leaders in the Solomons, opposing exploitation by timber companies, and warning against foreign influences in theology (e.g., at Rarongo Seminary!). The Christian Fellowship Church does have a Bible School, but it is based not so much on theology as on the conviction: "God is in our hearts!" Though Eto died, the "Holy Mama" lives forever (*Mama* in Austronesian language means "Father", as *Abba* does in Aramaic).

Was Silas Eto a typical cult leader in the sense that the whole movement depended on his personality? While this may be true of some of the cults of Indian origin, with their authoritarian *gurus*, at present operating in Europe and America, Esau Tuza did not think that Silas Eto had been the object of a personality cult in this sense. He asked: "If Jesus had not died at the age of 33, would He be considered to be the Son of God?" Christ can only be considered to be God *in time*, namely, the three years in which we see God in Jesus Christ. For Eto, the late 1960s and early 1970s were the only years during which he could be qualified as being within the Godhead. After these years, Silas Eto remained the same, but God the "Holy Mama" had already "risen" by the early 1970s. The "Holy Mama" is not regarded as being "in the body" of Silas Eto now. "Holy Mama" was only conceptualised between 1960 and 1970. By the early 1970s, "Holy Mama" was no longer "in the body" of Eto. At this time, Eto did not declare himself to be "Holy Mama"; rather, he sought the vision of "Holy Mama". When he died, it was as an ordinary *barogoso* (old man), not as "Holy Mama". This stimulated comparisons with the

avatar of Hindu tradition, the *bodhisattva* of Mahayana Buddhism, and the apotheosis, or theophany, of Hellenistic religion. The importance of the Epiphany, or Manifestation of the Lord, in Eastern Orthodoxy was also pointed out. This, rather than “incarnation”, would be a more appropriate Christian designation of Silas Eto’s “manifestation of glory” in the “Holy Mama”. The role of saints, such as Francis of Assisi, could shed further light on this peculiar quality of Eto’s claim. Perhaps we should even coin a new word such as “out-”, or “exarnation”, to capture the characteristic autonomy of “Holy Mama”, with regard to Eto, which, in a way, is the opposite of incarnation.

At this point, Theo Aerts shared with us the results of some research he had done into Jesus as the originator of a new religious movement. Most such figures have in common that they emerge when their time has arrived, e.g., when colonialism has become intolerable, and people are yearning for independence. Their vision presupposes a cultural background, that makes their prophecies plausible (in Jesus’ case, the coming Kingdom of God; in Melanesia, perhaps, the myth of the Two Brothers). This enables them to find the right words and images for their situation. They are usually preceded by false prophets, against whom they can measure themselves. They prove themselves by signs, miracles, and prophecies. Above all, their apparent failure, or even death, does not mean the end of their movements; quite the contrary! The movement is adapted to the changed situation, and continues with renewed strength. This suggests unsuspected parallels between Silas Eto and Christ. In the case of Eto, however, Esau Tuza proposed as the most-correct formulation: “The Holy Mama ‘rose’ before he (Eto) died – and therefore he has life.” Is this not reminiscent of the theology of John’s Gospel, and of Paul in Rom 6? It is the reality of the Risen One that matters, not the modality of His resurrection. The same Eto, who prayed four or five times daily, and read the entire Bible many times each year, was also very concerned with economic and political development in the present. The string stretched between two poles, which was the *locus* of Eto’s visions of Holy Mama,

may seem strange as a religious symbol. Yet this discussion, albeit inconclusive, showed that efforts to interpret indigenous religious phenomena theologically can bear surprisingly rich fruit.

NOTE

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