

DOCUMENTATION

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE IN MELANESIA*

Say: "People of the Book, let us come to an agreement: that we will worship none but Allah, that we will associate none with Him, and that none of us shall set us mortals as gods besides Him." If they refuse, say: "Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to Allah." (Qur'ān, Sura 3:64)

1. Melanesia is overwhelmingly Christian, thanks to more than a century of intensive mission work by most of the major Christian denominations in this area of the Southwest Pacific. There is tenuous contact between Melanesians and Muslims only at the two extremities of the region. Across the only land border in the whole of the South Pacific, which separates Papua New Guinea from Irian Jaya, Melanesia is contiguous with the largest Muslim nation on earth, Indonesia, with its 150 million people, up to 90 percent of them nominally Muslim. In the racially and religiously divided island nation of Fiji, far to the east, citizens of Indian origin, who were brought out as indentured labourers around the turn of the century, many of them (about 60,000, mostly Sunni) Muslims, outnumber Melanesians. Otherwise, apart from tiny expatriate minorities (e.g., the 12,000 Muslims from former French colonies in New Caledonia, and the Islamic Society of Papua New Guinea, founded in 1978), Islam is an unknown quantity, although the Bahā'i faith, which derives in part from Islam, is becoming quite widespread in the South Pacific. Both indigenous theology and religious studies are seriously underdeveloped; there is thus scarcely an opportunity for Melanesians to inform themselves about the history, culture, and worldwide resurgence of Islam in an appropriate theological context. Yet, political developments are forcing Indonesia, the major regional power besides Australia, and, with it, Islam, on the awareness of Melanesians.

2. Melanesian and African cultures, though by no means identical, have certain things in common. It may thus be instructive to study more closely the success of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, the modifications it has undergone there, and the lessons this may hold for the possible future expansion of Islam in Melanesia. At the very least, this is roughly the type of Islamic-animistic syncretism Melanesians are eventually likely to encounter. Islam established itself in Africa between the 11th and 16th centuries. It spread largely through the example of Africans themselves. Even in areas to which it came later than Christianity, it has been successful. Since 1800, it has won twice as many converts as the Christian denominations. The reasons for this success are not far to seek: Islam, like Christianity, brought literacy and law, broadening horizons beyond the restricted milieu of the tribe. Like Christianity, its spread coincided with colonial expansion and social upheaval. Although Islam, too, has to cope with fundamentalist movements, it has not always been an obstacle to development. Its theology is straightforward, and its asceticism, though demanding, has proved acceptable to Africans. It would seem to have had some success in correcting social abuses, e.g., alcohol, and in transforming African religion, through the acceptance of monotheism, though it is an open question how deep the encounter of Islam with tribal religion, modernisation, and Christianity, has really been. Nevertheless, the history of Islam in Africa offers much food for thought to Melanesians dissatisfied with their countries' progress under Christian influence.
3. A comparison between the course taken by Christianity in Africa and in Melanesia may also help to indicate possible developments in this region. In Africa, the introduction of Christianity generally occurred in the context of colonialism. First, larger mission bodies, and then smaller groups, worked among tribal peoples, and gradually developed local churches and expressions of Christianity, by and large, modelled on Western parent bodies. However, accompanying this desired

goal of mission, an unexpected response has also occurred: the spontaneous development of numerous new religious movements. Though these are of various types – some nativistic, others syncretic, some Hebraist, and many Christian in intention – they all arose out of a complex interaction between introduced Christianity and traditional African religions and cultures. A range of factors contributed to the development of a climate in which the movements are likely to emerge. One of the most significant of those factors, is the availability of the scriptures in the vernacular. The Old Testament, in particular – with its themes of social renewal, peace, justice, restored relationships, prosperity – has proved a potent stimulus for the emergence of African movements. Many of the names, structures, practices, and emphases in the independent churches highlight the relevance of the Old Testament to this continent's tribal peoples.

4. The course of Christianity in Melanesia has followed a remarkably similar pattern. Highly-intensive mission activity in a colonial situation was met by the ready acceptance of Christianity, and the growth of local national churches. Here also, these developments were accompanied by the emergence of new religious movements, more or less syncretic in nature. Cargo movements, as they are generally known, aspire to the obtainment of a better life in a transformed world. Some movements have developed political and business features, and, recently, a few have become independent churches. These movements indicate the dynamic quality of religion in Melanesia, its readiness to accept and assimilate new features. In comparison with the course of Christianity in Africa, these developments in Melanesia have occurred in a much smaller area, among much smaller groups, and in a much shorter time frame. With the shorter history of Christian contact, they also tend to lag behind developments in Africa. Considering the remarkably similar pattern in Melanesia and Africa, one can only wonder what will occur when the Old Testament is published in the Melanesian *lingua franca*, *Tok Pisin* (Pidgin):

one can foresee that this will speak to the tribal people of Melanesia in a powerful way, and stimulate the development of new religious movements. Perhaps it will also provide the basis for a larger identity.

5. On the assumption that the dialogue of Melanesian Christians with Islam, when it takes place, will probably occur in the two contexts mentioned in (1), the Indonesian and the Fijian, the following observations are of interest. Different as they may be in almost every respect, these two contexts have one thing in common: neither is an Islamic state, in the classical sense, which still sets the pattern in the Arab heartland of Islam, e.g., in Saudi Arabia, and whose influence is growing, e.g., in Sudan and Pakistan. In Fiji, Muslims are a religious minority, though their involvement with the Indian-based National Federation Party gives them considerable, if indirect, political influence. In Indonesia, though Muslims are nominally in an overwhelming majority, the coalition of Muslim-oriented political parties, the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, defers to the *de facto* ruling party, GOLKAR (percent). The PPP has only recently accepted the official ideology of *Pancasila*, the “five principles”, the first of which is belief in a Godhead that is One, with its implications of religious tolerance. Melanesian Christians are thus not immediately confronted by that peculiar identity of religious and political authority, which European Christians have sometimes found so perplexing when dealing with Islam in its more traditional forms.
6. The very existence of Islam is a challenge, which strikes at the heart of Christian faith and theology. Whereas Judaism may be regarded as the “Old Covenant”, now superseded by the new – although more and more theologians are beginning to realise the inadequacy of this construction – Islam explicitly claims to supersede both Judaism and Christianity. The study and use of the Hebrew Bible, which is about to appear in its entirety in Pidgin translation, are not as advanced in Melanesia as in Africa, and, consequently, the theological basis for

dialogue with Islam is still deficient. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists, especially among the more-recently-arrived missions and sects, categorically reject as syncretism any attempt to come to terms with the religious elements in Melanesian cultures; suggestions that Islam may be sympathetically understood, with a view to entering into dialogue, are, for them, totally out of the question. The seminaries and theological colleges of the longer-established churches, which in 1969 formed the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, devote little or no time to informing their students about Islam, or broadening their theological horizons to envisage relationships between the Christian faith and religions other than their own traditional ones.

7. Despite these obstacles, we see certain prospects for Muslim-Christian dialogue in Melanesia. Once it becomes better known, Islam, with its uncompromising monotheism, its strict morality, which yet condones polygamy, its clearly-defined asceticism and worship, and its communal structure devoid of clerical hierarchies, may well appeal to succeeding generations on whom Christianity's hold will not be so strong. Political developments in the region point to a growing awareness of the presence and vitality of Islam. As neither contemporary nor historical Judaism play much part in Melanesian Christianity, the impending encounter with Islam would be the first major religious challenge to be faced by these fledgling indigenous churches.
8. Melanesian Christians will probably see the main obstacle to dialogue with Islam not so much in the nature or characteristics of Islam itself as in the gospel admonition: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Their own appropriation of this fundamental principal of Christianity is still uncertain after a hard-won victory over the powers inherent in their traditional religion. It is beginning to be realised that this "victory" is in

fact far from complete, and that the process of missionary interaction with Melanesian cultures should rather have been a dialogue, which would have issued in new indigenous forms of Christianity, even perhaps in a sort of mutual conversion. As this process continues, Islam may come to be seen, not merely as the rival and alien religion of the “enemy”, nor yet as a simple alternative to Christianity, but as a powerful spiritual and ethical force in its own right, with which Christians must reckon, even if only in virtue of its “being there”, and claiming the allegiance of millions.

9. But before this stage is reached in Melanesia, many prejudices between Indonesia and Melanesians on the one hand, and Indians and Melanesians on the other, will have to be overcome. Steps in this direction have already been taken: in Fiji, an inter-faith committee arranges an inter-faith service each Independence Day, though the Council of Religions, envisaged by some, has not yet become a reality. In Indonesia, Asia’s third largest Christian community, still a tiny minority in the world’s largest Muslim nation, has no choice but to reach a working relationship with Islam, and talks have begun between the Melanesian Council of Churches and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia in the context of increasing trouble along the border with Irian Jaya. In the field of force between these two poles, peaceful dialogue in Fiji, and tense confrontation with Indonesia, it would seem inevitable that the present barely-existent relationships of Christian Melanesians with Muslims develop.

* This statement resulted from a request by a World Council of Churches’ sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths for “a short paper . . . about the form and content of Muslim-Christian dialogue” in Melanesia. The sub-unit plans to hold a meeting on this question, and to produce some Ecumenical Considerations on Muslim-Christian Dialogue for general use.

The Melanesian Institute
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