

EDITORIAL

Towards a Theology of Religious Experience for Melanesia

For almost 15 years, thanks to generous assistance from the Programme on Theological Education (formerly Theological Education Fund) of the World Council of Churches, the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools has held Study Institutes every two years, at which seminary staff and senior students have been able to present and discuss papers on topics of common interest. These regular meetings, perhaps more than any other factor, have made MATS a truly ecumenical organisation.

The seventh such Study Institute was held at the United Church Christian Education and Communication Centre, overlooking the magnificent volcanic harbour of Rabaul in East New Britain Province, from September 23 to 26, 1985, on the theme "Towards a Theology of Religious Experience for Melanesia". This theme was not chosen, as it might have been in Europe, with a view to discussing religious psychology or individual spirituality. Rather, we had in mind both the indigenous religious movements, which have become famous under the somewhat misleading title of "cargo cults", and the more-recent "Holy Spirit Movements", whose relationship to the former has by no means been clarified (three volumes in the Melanesian Institute's *Point* Series, Nos. 2-4, edited by Wendy Flannery, 1983-1984, have extensively documented both types of movements). In addition, we wanted to do justice to those elements in traditional Melanesian religion, which would make Christian spirituality a matter of immediate "experience" for Melanesians if they were incorporated successfully in the worship and evangelism of the churches.

Melanesians do theology best in the form of discussion, including storytelling and personal testimony. I should like to introduce the papers given at Malmaluan, by drawing on the often-lively discussions which followed them, under several headings:

Dreams and Visions: The paper by Ellison Suri of the Solomon Islands shows how these manifestations of religious experience, which are taken for granted as media of divine revelation in both the Old and New Testaments, function

in Melanesian societies. Melanesian participants insisted that dreams contribute to understanding events, and are an integral part of Melanesian life, even in areas as sensitive as the divination of guilt, though it was conceded that larger modern societies, as distinct from the village community, or the tribal unit, need more “objective” means of establishing breaches of the law. We were told how the Methodist preachers of South Cornwall in England accepted the use of dreams in finding lost pigs, which contributed to the spread of Methodism in the area! Even in the West, dreams are being taken more seriously, which has not only contributed to mental health, but has opened up the whole realm of “myth” to deeper understanding (e.g., the “dreaming” of the Australian Aborigines). Sorcery and magic are being reassessed according to other peoples’ criteria of the “good” and the “rational”. Kasek Kautil stressed that Melanesians prefer to base their interpretation of events on “experience” rather than “ideas”; William To Kilala, that dreams and visions have a function of social control, which allows people to cope with their social situation as a whole; and Ronnie Tom, that the key to understanding them lies in appreciating the role of imagination in faith and theology.

Song and Dance: While we were enjoying a sumptuous luncheon at Rarongo Theological College, the Papuan students and their wives spontaneously broke out in the *Peroveta* songs and dances that Ronnie Tom had told us about the day before. We were confronted with an imagery in which “darkness” did not necessarily mean sin and perdition, but had overtones of the fruitful darkness brooded over by the Spirit, even before the missionaries came. It was suggested that the *Peroveta* are based on the songs of yearning sung by Motuan women while their menfolk were away on lengthy trading journeys (*hiri*) in their canoes (*lakatoi*), but in the Christian context they can be both prophetic and charismatic. Rhythmic movement is such an integral part of them that even the lively melodies of the Methodists seem foreign to those who are used to expressing their spirituality with body and voice, heart and mind, in this way. Such an experience cannot be “explained” intellectually, though it must be asked how the presence of God disclosed in the *Peroveta* experience may be reconciled with the revelation of Him in Christ, which they affirm.

Authority of Word and Spirit: The well-known tensions between evangelicals and charismatics regarding the interpretation of ecstatic religious experiences in the light of scripture may lead us to think that the authority of the Word can be played off against the authority of the Spirit. Jerome Burce, while not minimising the

problems posed by charismatic Lutherans in Enga Province, insisted that this need not be so. Faith itself, not its weakness or strength, as expressed in ecstatic phenomena or spiritual gifts, makes one a member of Christ's body. The basis of such faith is the authority of the Word, our only means of knowing Christ, though others urged the claims of "reason", "theology", and, of course, "experience", as playing a part in acquiring knowledge of Christ. We were warned that controversy about "faith" can sometimes be no more than a smoke screen for "Enga reasoning", i.e., local controversies, that would have gone on anyway. The need of Melanesian societies for unity, torn as they are by tribal and religious dissension (and sometimes by the former masquerading as the latter!), was set against the imperative of accepting cultural diversity, and even competition for people's allegiance, in the religious, as in the political, field. William To Kilala pointed out that it is not unusual for revival to follow evangelisation; in Enga, however, the two were virtually simultaneous, with the result that Christian faith has not yet become an integral part of the Enga personality. The record of a conversation between Theo Ahrens, a former missionary, and Andrew Strathern, a noted anthropologist, who recently joined a Pentecostal church, shows how much we still have to learn about respecting the always very particular forms of experience through which faith becomes effective in people's lives.

A stimulating paper by Paul Richardson is critical of both expatriate Christian sects, and indigenous religious movements, calling for more theological and spiritual discrimination in dealing with them. Some expatriate-based sectarian groups succeed in tapping indigenous sources of religious experience – but, unknowingly, which is possibly more dangerous than either rejection or manipulation. The issue of the fundamentalism, which is characteristic of many of these groups, has yet to be squarely faced. In what sense does Christian faith "satisfy" people's needs, or "fill the void", of meaninglessness? Is it helpful, because it is true, or does its truth depend on its helpfulness? Or, to put it in more Melanesian terms: what is the source of the *pawa* (power), which is the focus of Melanesian interest in religion? Does it not lie in the paradox of the cross rather than in "feeling good", or "being saved", or "getting results"? Religious traditions, like individuals, go through an adolescence, during which they experiment with various roads to fulfilment. Melanesian Christians must have the same freedom, so long as they are able to remain in conversation with Christians of other traditions and in different situations.

Health and Healing: This subject, of the greatest importance, both in traditional Melanesia, and in revivalist Christianity, was unfortunately not treated at the Study Institute. However, two significant articles on it have appeared recently: a community-based approach to Christian health work by Brian Schwarz, “Take up your Bed and Walk”, in *An Introduction to Ministry in Melanesia, Point 7*; and a highly-sensitive account by Garry Trompf of the so-called “miracle girl” Ioa Boiori, “Can Anything Good Come Out of Baruni?: Some Comments on Christian and Traditional Healing in Melanesia”, in *Catalyst* 15 (1985), pp. 286-295.

Churches and Sects: Bringing us down to the practicalities of religious experience in Melanesia, Theo Aerts presented a well-researched critique of the *Religious Movements (Control) Bill* proposed in 1981. Those present, quickly agreed that something of the sort is urgently needed, but attempts to contain sectarianism by legal means must be based on sound theology. Some felt strongly that Melanesian communities must ultimately be one in religious matters; others entered a plea for religious pluralism. It is one thing to control the entry of expatriate missionaries into the country; but when Papua New Guineans become Mormons or Muslims, their right to freedom of religion may not be infringed upon. On the other hand, the churches must be prepared to minister to former members of sectarian bodies, and, if necessary, re-accept them into their communities. The seminaries should ensure that future pastors have sufficient historical knowledge to discriminate among the various sects, in the light of their origins.

Theology and Religious Studies: One of the first lecturers in Religious Studies at the University of Papua New Guinea, Professor Garry Trompf, flew to Rabaul especially to brief us on the future prospects of the discipline at UPNG. They are not bright. Not only is there still residual opposition to religious studies among academics; the seminaries, too, are less than whole-hearted in their acceptance of it as a necessary complement of theology, and the proposed major in religious education at Goroka Teachers’ College is meeting with stubborn opposition from certain public servants in the Education Department. If problems such as the relationship between traditional and Christian religious experience in Melanesia are to be tackled adequately, a long-overdue and very-fundamental debate on the most profitable ways of studying religion – one’s own and others’ – has yet to take place, most appropriately, perhaps, in the pages of this Journal.

John D’Arcy May
Executive Editor.