

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, AND THE SEARCH FOR A MELANESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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In his book, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, Gustavo Gutierrez makes some comments on the spiritual experience of Christians in South America, which will find a sympathetic response in other parts of the world. Gutierrez refers to a split between the daily lives of most Christians, and the spiritual discipline the church commends to them. Religious life, as the church presents it, is geared to minorities, to people who belong to privileged cultural and social elites. The stress of many spiritual guides is on the interior life of the individual, who is called on to pursue perfection, with little regard for what goes on in the world. This, in Gutierrez' opinion, is not a way of spiritual growth, which can comment itself to the poor, oppressed and dispossessed masses of Latin America.¹

Of course, the situation in Papua New Guinea is different from the one that confronts Gustavo Gutierrez. The extremes of wealth and poverty that can be found in Peru or Chile do not yet exist in our country. But many priests and church workers would testify to some kind of gap between the official spirituality of the church and the experience of the people. To a considerable degree, this gap is due to cultural factors: our written liturgies (often in a foreign language), our discipline of prayer and worship, our approach to meditation, are all too Western. Students have often told me that, while people in the villages can feel the presence of the ancestors, the Christian God often seems far away from them, a remote being who can be known by faith, or with the help of reason, but who rarely shows His power in the daily events of life. "Power" is a key word. Melanesians want a God who shows His power, who gives people signs of His presence, and becomes part of their experience. They do not want a God who serves as the source of morality, or as the ultimate explanation of the universe.

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: the Spiritual Journey of a People*, Matthew J. O'Connell, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1984, pp.13-15.

They want a God they can meet with in their own lives, who answers their prayers, and reaches out to them, and blesses them.

To some observers, the growth of Pentecostalism in Papua New Guinea over the past few years is the answer to this need. Reading the four volumes of papers and reports on new religious movements, published by the Melanesian Institute,² one comes across numerous remarks to the effect that now, at last people, have seen the power of the gospel. John Barr sums up these impressions in his introduction to volume two:

It is overwhelmingly clear to many participants that the Holy Spirit is theirs in a truly indigenous sense. The coming of the Holy Spirit marks the end of “foreign” Christianity, and a chance to encounter faith in a spontaneous manner, with “power” – to encounter spiritual realms with confidence and authority.³

Other contributors to the four volumes voice reservations. Both Sister Wendy Flannery and the Revd Gary Teske are, on the whole, enthusiastic, but they express some hesitations. Flannery wonders whether some of the practices she has observed are just a substitute for similar practices carried out in traditional religion.⁴ Teske reflects on the Christian understanding of “power”, as we find it in St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, and compares this with the expectation that religion must, somehow, commend itself by miraculous cures, or other striking phenomena.⁵

We have a problem here, which has troubled missionaries down from St Paul’s time to the present: how do we distinguish between religious practices which are truly indigenous expressions of the gospel, and those which represent a continuation of pagan beliefs in a thin Christian disguise? Or, to use the terminology made popular by Dr Charles Kraft, do followers of the new religious

² Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (1), Point 2 (1983); Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983); Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4 (1984); see also Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia: a Selection of Case Studies and Reports*, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1983.

³ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3, p. vii.

⁴ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4, p. 149.

⁵ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3, p. 248.

movements use forms that are at least partly traditional to convey meanings that are essentially Christian, or do these traditional forms really distort the gospel, and retain their own meaning?

There is no simple answer to this question. In this paper, I would like to draw attention to four areas where, it seems to me, there is reason to question the teaching and practices of the new religious movements. The points to be discussed do not, by themselves, constitute grounds for the rejection of such movements; they are offered merely as criticisms, which ought to be weighed when a final balance is made. Other commentators have drawn attention to the benefits Pentecostal revivalism has brought to the churches in Papua New Guinea. I would like to try my hand, not at being a judge who is competent to pass final sentence, but rather at making out a case for the prosecution. In other words, I am playing the devil's advocate.

1. A number of observers have pointed to the presence among adherents of the new movements of attitudes normally associated with cargo cults. Groups have often sprung up in areas of economic deprivation, where the people feel cheated of the fruits of development. The *Bilip Grup*, for example, is active in the Garaina area of the Morobe Province, where an important tea project closed in 1970, because it was no longer financially viable. Transport problems have made the substitution of other cash crops difficult. Sr Wendy Flannery tells us there is a lack of confidence in government officials, and a general reluctance to maintain roads or pay taxes. The emphasis is on *wok bilip*, and she reports people as saying "*long lotu tasol ol samting i kamap*" (prayer alone is the answer to development).⁶ Before Flannery's visit, there had been definite signs of cargo activity. In 1979, people had cleared an abandoned Summer Institute of Linguistics airstrip, and lined up waiting for cargo to arrive. Garden work had stopped.

There is an interesting parallel with the situation just across the border in the Oro Province. There, the Christian Revival Crusade is active in an area which has experienced little economic development, partly because of transport problems. The Anglican church once ran a small boat along the coast, and bought copra from the people, but this stopped in the mid-1970s. An attempt to set up a development association, known as KOMGE, collapsed, leading to a

⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

good deal of frustration. Today, many of the villages, which supported Komge, are centres of CRC activity, and a number of people who were prominent in Komge are leaders in the CRC church.

The Revd Gary Teske refers to two cases of activity with cargo cult overtones in the revival in the Enga Province, but says that they died out quickly, and he knows of no other. Clearly, it would be wrong to exaggerate the influence of cargo ideas in the new movements, but there are some signs of it. Of course, the fact that a revival is taking place in an area of economic deprivation does not mean that it is like a cargo cult. A religious movement can represent a protest against economic or social inequality without, in any way, showing signs of cargo cult influence. There is evidence that young people and women have been especially attracted to Pentecostal movements, and seen in them a way to improve their status, and play a bigger part in church life than was possible before.

On the other hand, we should not ignore the fact that popular expectations of the imminent return of Christ, which are found in most Pentecostal circles, can be an encouragement to the growth of the kind of hope for the future seen in cargo cults – a factor which is acknowledged by Flannery, and seen to be significant in the case of the *Bilip Grup*.

2. In a number of cases, there are reports of the Holy Spirit turning the followers of the new movements into diviners, and of practices being carried out under the Spirit's influence, which are similar to traditional methods of detecting wrong-doers. Of interest in this respect, are the "dogs" found among revivalist Baptists in the Enga and Western Highlands Provinces. A group of people, called "dogs", seek out sinners, and encourage them to confess, sometimes with the help of a stick, which points to the guilty party.⁷ Among Lutherans involved in the revival movement in Enga, there are reports of prophets having visions, in which they see the sins and wrongs other people have committed. Women, who are believed to have practised as *sanguma meri* (sorcerers), have been taken to court on this kind of evidence.⁸ Prophets claim to be able to detect wrong-doers at worship, and to be able to tell sick people whether or not they will die. Sister Wendy Flannery describes spirit-empowered diviners in Garaina, who are known

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

as “scientists”, and are believed to be able to locate medicinal substances in trees, or copper, or gold, in the earth.⁹ Teske reports from Kandep that a good number of visions he heard reported had to do with identifying sorcerers.¹⁰

Related to this is the problem of the use of dreams by those involved in the new movements. Dreams have always been regarded as a source of revelation in Melanesia, and there are moving accounts of people in the Enga being converted to Christ in this way. Back in 1970, in an account of a cult in the Highlands, Kenneth B. Osborne reported that the cult leader was so worried about the possible misuse of dreams that he drew up a list of three tests to be applied to verify the authenticity of dreams.¹¹ However, such care is not always exercised in revival movements. Talking about a movement at Ialibu, in the Southern Highlands, Roger White mentions one dream, in which a young man saw two catechists of the area drunk and fighting. Not surprisingly, this caused a stir when it was reported to a prayer group.¹²

3. Reports of new religious movements in Papua New Guinea often emphasise outbursts of ecstatic phenomena, such as convulsive shaking (*skin guria*), or speaking in tongues. Many of these practices, which are today interpreted as decisive evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, were common in traditional religion. In the 1940s, in the Enga Province, for example, a religious movement took place, in which people would shake as they faced the sun. F. E. Williams reported ecstatic shaking (known as *jipari*) among the followers of the taro cult in the Oro Province.¹³ When *jipari* took place, people believed that they were possessed by the spirits of the ancestors. On a visit to Ioma, in the area where the CRC is very active, I asked an old man, who was a member of a CRC congregation, if the practices, common in his church today, were similar to the *jipari* of the taro cult. He told me that it was similar, but that,

⁹ Ibid., p. 170. Flannery also gives an account of *wairles* men, who receive messages about God’s will for people. Sometimes they receive these messages by standing beside a coconut tree, and experiencing a pain in the ear. They are also able to discern messages from God in the activities of fireflies, blowflies, and flying foxes. There are also comments on the “scientists”, Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4, p. 133.

¹⁰ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3, p. 119.

¹¹ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia: a Selection of Case Studies and Reports*, p. 118.

¹² Ibid., p. 164.

¹³ Francis Edgar Williams, *Orokaiva Magic*, London UK: Clarendon Press, 1969.

whereas before people were thinking about the ancestors, now they were possessed by the Holy Spirit.

This brings us back to the problem of deciding whether traditional religious forms, which have surfaced again in the new movements, have now acquired a Christian meaning, or whether they represent a continuation of pre-Christian ways of thinking.

A Westerner ought to hesitate before passing judgment, but, perhaps, I can offer some observations. Reading accounts of the revival movement in Papua New Guinea, it is apparent that the Holy Spirit is often seen, not as a person of the Godhead, but as a kind of impersonal power that can be possessed for a time, but also can be lost. Amos Aenyu, from Kandep, tells us that the Holy Spirit can leave people, and warns that this happens if water is thrown over a sleeping man, if someone speaks loudly when the spirit is entering a man, if a man, possessed by the spirit, is rubbed with a special leaf that causes swelling, or if someone, who has the spirit, carries heavy loads, or does heavy duties.¹⁴ Clearly, behind this way of thinking, lies the idea that the spirit is some kind of power, whose presence can be gained or lost, depending on the observance of certain taboos. This is quite different from the Christian belief that the Holy Spirit is a Person of the Blessed Trinity, who dwells permanently with us to enable us to respond to Christ, and to be remade in the image of Christ. Simeon Namunu sees the issue, when he refers to the problems that can arise when Melanesians substitute the Holy Spirit for traditional spirits, and then continue to interpret the Holy Spirit from within the old framework of beliefs. So, for example, the Holy Spirit is seen as having a place in a hierarchy of spirits that may have existed in traditional religion, and there may be the belief that He is used by God to do both good and evil. People seek to regulate the activity of the Holy Spirit by the

¹⁴ Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3, p. 133. An interesting link between traditional religion and modern Pentecostalism is provided by Teske, when he describes the practice in the Kandep area of “sunrise shaking”. This occurs as the sun rises, when people shake and feel filled with the Spirit. It is similar to the dancing of the sun gazers in the Enga Province in the 1940s, and, according to Teske, there are a number of parallels between the two movements, Gary Teske, “The Holy Spirit Movement Among Enga Lutherans (Kandep)”, in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983), p. 117.

performance of ritual, which is regarded as more important than moral behaviour.¹⁵

4. Time and again, in reading reports of new religious movements, one discovers that they were welcomed by the people, because they, at last, gave evidence that the gospel has power. Melanesians expect spiritual beings to show their power in some kind of way – by granting a good harvest, for example, or by miraculous cures. People involved in the new movements often say that now they know the gospel has power. As they phrase it, *samting tru i kamap*. They feel joy in their hearts, and they know that God is for real. Christianity, they claim, has come alive in their own experience; they do not have to accept it on the word of some expatriate missionary. This is the greatest strength of the Pentecostal revival in Papua New Guinea, and an important reason for claiming that it represents a step forward towards the indigenisation of Christianity. T. Wayne Dye has recently devoted two articles in *Catalyst* to the theology of power.¹⁶ He finds ample evidence from the New Testament that we should expect that signs of power will accompany the preaching of the gospel. When Paul and the other early Christians proclaimed the good news, their message was authenticated by the defeat of evil spirits, and by miraculous cures. Acts 5:15 tells us that people waited in the streets so that Peter's shadow would pass over them as he walked by, and they would be healed. Paul reminded the Corinthians, in 1 Cor 12:12, of the many miracles, signs, and wonders he had performed among them as an apostle. Any Melanesian theology, Dye argues, must take the question of power seriously. In doing so, it will both meet the concerns of Melanesians, and be faithful to the New Testament. Above all, a theology of power must not just be formulated: it must be exemplified in the lives of Christians. "The heart of any effective teaching about power will be the demonstration of God at work in and through Christians, to heal and strengthen, and show his greatness."¹⁷

I suspect that Gary Teske will have some reservations about Dye's approach. He pinpoints what he calls the "effective power criterion", which is

¹⁵ Simeon Namunu, "Spirits in Melanesia and the Spirit in Christianity", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (3), Point 4 (1984), p. 113.

¹⁶ T. Wayne Dye, "A Theology of Power for Melanesia, part 1", *Catalyst* 14-1 (1984), pp. 57-75; T. Wayne Dye, "Toward a Theology of Power for Melanesia", *Catalyst* 14-2 (1984), pp. 158-180.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

often used in Papua New Guinea to decide on the value of a particular church, or method of worship.¹⁸ In the light of this, he wonders what the followers of the new movements are prepared to make of the famous passage in 1 Cor 1:22-23, where Paul condemns both the Greeks, and their desire for wisdom, and the Jews, with their hunger for miracles.

He makes this telling observation:

Our friends in the new religious movements need to look at themselves, and judge whether they are exploiting a timely appetite for miraculous and experiential power to put together an exciting movement, and, if in the process, they are missing the real uniqueness and ageless significance of the miracle of Jonah.¹⁹

Passages in the New Testament can be found to support the views of Dye, but a number of other passages can be quoted to show that Jesus Himself was wary about using miraculous signs of power to support His message. In the quotation, to which Teske alludes, Christ's response to a request for a miracle is reported by Matthew as not being very sympathetic towards those who hunger for such signs; "An evil generation looks for a sign. The only sign you will be given will be the sign of Jonah" (Matt 12:39).

According to Luke 10:19-20, Jesus promised the 70 that they would be given authority to perform numerous acts of power, but then He added: "Nonetheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." To those who had faith, the miracles were truly signs of God's power, but Jesus must have known that there were miracle workers alive in His time who claimed greater powers than He did, and He never used his miracles to convert unbelievers to His side.

In the end, as on so many occasions, when scripture appears to point in two directions, we have to see how the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret the matter. In the history of the church, miracles, and similar spectacular signs, have been valued as evidence of the truth of the gospel, but the greatest sign has always been the witness of the martyrs. It is in their lives, above all, that we see

¹⁸ Gary Teske, "Worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today* (2), Point 3 (1983), p. 247.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

the gospel has power. In them, we see the same self-sacrificing love we see in the death of Christ. Next to the martyrs, we put the saints, men and women, whose lives were often accompanied by miracles, but who are chiefly memorable for the sanctity and holiness that they displayed.

CONCLUSION

On the evidence that has so far been gathered, the new religious movements we are seeing in Melanesia at the moment, are neither heretical nor evil. They have done much to revive and quicken the church, and have brought many to a deeper faith in Christ. At the same time, there are aspects of them that seem to me to call for a further evaluation. Perhaps I could suggested that Melanesian theologians approach them in the kind of sympathetic, but critical, spirit that Kosuke Koyama brings to his analysis of the different religious of is native Japan in his book *Mt Fuji and Mt Sinai*. Putting my own criticism rather bluntly, I would say that I do not see in them enough of the Spirit of the cross, of the readiness to die with Christ that one finds in, say, the desert fathers, or the lives of Ini Kopuria or Peter To Rot. There is vitality, enthusiasm, commitment, excitement, power of a kind, but is there any sense of the paradox Paul grasped when he was led to tell the Corinthians that it is when we are weak that we are strong? (2 Cor 12:10).

To return to the point with which I began, does all this mean that spirituality has to be world-denying, and monastic, and, therefore, remote from the lives of ordinary people? Am I, after all, advocating the kind of spirituality that Gustav Gutierrez condemns? I do not think so.

In the first place, we need to remember that the idea of self-sacrifice is not something foreign to the Melanesian experience. There are, for example, many stories of *dema* deities, who gave life to their own people by their own death. Many practices, traditional in initiation, are based on the belief that we must all pass through the discipline of suffering before we can be adult members of the community. Stories of culture heroes often involve the hero in a long journey, in which he faces severe testing, and overcomes obstacles before he gains his prize. Above all, the church in Melanesia has produced an abundance of Christians, who have faced hardship, even death, in the service of the gospel.

But, in the second place, we need to remember that Christianity does not teach a gospel of renunciation for its own sake: death is always the way to life;

victory over selfishness and sin is the first necessary step on the road to resurrection.

As Melanesian society becomes more and more divided between the haves and the have-nots, and as Western materialism continues to spread under the cover of pidgin catchphrases like *pinisim laik*, or *Laik bilong wan wan*, so the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ will become more and more apparent. Dedication to the cause of justice and peace, readiness to sacrifice oneself in the service of others, love for one's neighbour – these are the real signs of the power of the gospel. Gutierrez is right. We need a spirituality, which is relevant to the experience of Melanesians in their daily lives. But, let us make sure that it is a spirituality which encourages Melanesians to grow close to Him who came not to be served but to serve, and to give up His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:41).

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