

MISSIONARY ATTITUDES

A Subjective and Objective Analysis

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Introduction

All Melanesian countries, such as, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, or Vanuatu, and Irian Jaya, are part of worldwide Christianity. We claim ourselves to be Christians, and certainly we are. The influence, that made us Christian, came about historically during the 18th and 19th centuries, out of mission endeavour on the part of the older Christendom. Missionaries have imported Christianity, “wrapped” in their ideologies, cultural technologies, scientific cosmologies, and personal idiosyncrasies.

In this essay, I am focusing my attention on those powerful factors, and I hope to show how these elements have exerted influence upon Melanesians, both positively and negatively, and how the people have reacted to the foreign impact. This is done, firstly, by evaluating factors that “shaped” missionaries in their homelands, before taking up their missionary posts in Melanesia. After this, we shall then follow them to the mission fields, and carefully observe how they influenced Melanesians. Finally, the essay will examine Melanesian reactions and responses.

One of the intentions of this essay has been to “refute” the unsustainable prejudices and criticisms levelled against missionaries by national elites of Melanesia, which suggests that “missionaries have ruined and abolished our cultures”. This view, often perceived from the negative side, has ignored the beneficial contributions and service rendered by missionaries. Although, I agree, that this negative bias had some elements of truth in it, it does not account for all that missionaries did, or aimed to do in the mission fields. Equally as important as the first view, just stated, is that we, young and old alike, have exaggerated missionary benevolence, saying, “Everything they did and said was all good, and there is no evil

about them”. This ignores the fact that missionaries are human beings, and were able to make mistakes.

The missions covered within this paper are the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Methodists, the Baptists, the Anglicans, and the Presbyterians. The areas covered in this paper are Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Irian Jaya. I concede that this paper is not exhaustive, but a hotch-potch survey. Some of the experiences cited are bewildering, and not easy to come to terms with. Some may dislike the exposition of them, but these are realities we need to know, as part of our history of Christian development.

The Shaping of Missionaries at Home

Any human being is a by-product of a society. She/he is also the building block of her/his own society, so she/he gives and takes, as a member of her or his society. Because of these interactions, before considering missionary attitudes abroad, it is proper that, first of all, we must investigate, as clearly as possible, some significant factors, which influenced the missionaries at home in their own society. The great Missionary Movement, which reached Melanesian shores during the 18th and 19th centuries, was to fulfil the commission of Jesus the Christ, “To preach the gospel to mankind and baptise them in His name, and help them to believe in God” (Matt 28:19, 20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The early Apostles and Christian communities were absolutely convinced that this was their foremost obligation.

Centuries later, many people had the same obedience and faithfulness to that imperative of Jesus the Christ. The Protestant communities in England were challenged and motivated by optimistic and outspoken men like William Carey, in 1792 (who later became a Baptist pioneer to India), John Scutcliffe, c1784, and many other zealous, missionary-minded people, to go out into the world, bring the “great tidings”, and Christianise heathens.¹

¹ Cf. John Briggs, “The English Baptists”, in *Lion Handbook History of Christianity*, T. Dowley, ed., Tring UK: Lion Publishing, 1977.

While the commission was spelt out, these mission communities were conservatively preoccupied with their “theology of hell-fire”, and total depravity of the unchristianised and uncivilised people (in this instance, the Pacific Islanders). This was basically a continuation of Augustinian doctrine,² which still persists in some Christian communities today. However, from the end of the 18th century onwards, this theological orientation was radically declining, as liberal theological understanding emerged with the proclamation of the “Fatherhood of God” and the “Brotherhood of all men”. Protestants were possibly persuaded to adopt this liberal theology by the influence of the development of anthropology as a scientific discipline, which called on all Europeans, particularly the missionaries, to have unbiased, perceptive, and accommodative views, when approaching the various uncivilised peoples of the world, rather than condemning native cultures as evil. Such an appeal was a new and positive trend towards attributing human dignity and integrity to natives, and the conservation of their cultural and religious institutions.

Early mission beliefs and anthropological developments emphasised European racial, cultural, economic, and religious superiority over black, or coloured, peoples, in particular Melanesians. (Does not the word “Melanesia” include the meaning “dark” or “black”, connoting some derogatory ideas, apart from its anthropological implication?) European anthropology is not without bias. In later periods, as anthropology began to advance, it fundamentally penetrated the mentality of the missionaries, altering their rigid theological course, to make it more flexible towards indigenous peoples. Thus, the missionaries were shaped and moulded by the contemporary intellectual developments of anthropology. This especially liberated the Protestant churches, mission boards, and missionaries from their theological, social, and psychological imprisonments. Behind the development of this social science, there were many thinkers of erudition, but, among them, were these three great figures. The first was Herbert Spencer, who penetrated and diluted civilised minds with his “Theory of superorganic evolution”, popularly known as “Survival of the fittest”, in England. Charles Darwin launched his “Theory of

² Cf. Charles W. Forman, “Foreign Missionaries in the Pacific Islands during the Twentieth Century”, in *Mission, Church, and Sect in Oceania*, ASAO Monograph, James A. Boutlier, Daniel T. Hughes, Sharon W. Tiffany, eds, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1978, pp. 35-63.

evolution”, in *The Origin of Species*, based on the principle of natural selection and adaptation, also in England (1829). Across the Atlantic Ocean, in America, Lewis Morgan (a Presbyterian minister) released his “Theory of Cultural Evolution”, in 1877, with its three stages of progression from “savagery to barbarism, and from barbarism to civilisation”.³

These advancements of the social sciences contributed positively, yet simultaneously, had devastating effects on relationships between the races and cultures of humankind. Firstly, they brought out into the open the racial, cultural, economic, and political gaps between whites and blacks, the strong and the weak. These prejudices permeated into all sectors of European life and institutions. Moreover, they changed men’s understanding of the world, man, and God. Especially, Darwin’s theory of evolution, which led to vigorous attacks on Christianity, stated that the world and man evolved within a very long space of time to become what they are today. This seemed to do away with the biblical concept of creation, and to consider the story of creation as an illusion. This view still persists in many universities of our day. The theory of evolution was translated into the field of social science, which elevated the authority, status, and dignity of whites in the world. This, in turn, contributed towards the enslavement of the black man, as the white man’s material commodity, and tool.

The concept of slavery is not new; it is as old as man, himself, and civilisation. But the recruitment of blacks from Africa to the American continent, from the Pacific Islands to Latin America and Australia, was basically for economic reasons. The black man was taken out and alienated by the white man from his home, family, and country, to become a tool, a commodity to be sold by white masters to other white masters. The belief in the great commission, the theology of hellfire, and total depravity of man, and the theory of evolution, were certainly the influential ideas or marks which the white people projected on the black people. The whites claimed that the black man was the last of the human species to be evolved, still stagnant, and at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. They appraised

³ William Tokilala, lecture notes on “Social Change”, Rabaul PNG: Rarongo Theological College, 1983.

that whites pioneered civilisation. Likewise, they believed themselves to be the “strongest” and the fittest, to survive the bitter struggles of evolution, while blacks were the weakest, and the least fit, who would eventually perish from the evolutionary ladder, when progress reached its culmination.

In this way, blacks were considered “sub-human”. If blacks had not reached the stage of being fully developed human beings, they were closer to animals, and could thus be used and manipulated at will, as impersonal tools and objects for the economic advantage of the whites. That is why slavery reigned from the 16th to early 18th centuries. When the movement for the abolition of slavery reached its height, with the emancipation of the slaves in North America (initiated from England), in the Southern states there were approximately 45,000 planters (whites, who possessed black slaves). Those who supported the cause of slavery remarked: “Slavery is in support of the law of nature, for the strong to rule the weak.”⁴

This is not the whole, or the only, cause of the slavery movement during the 16th to the 18th centuries, but was the basis of the intellectual reasoning of that age. Slavery was properly exploited for its agricultural and economic advantages. Whatever their profession, whether religious or secular, whatever their cultural background and political differences, anybody, who was white, was a higher creature than the black. Missionaries were not exempted from these current sentiments. They became part and parcel of the missionary mentality and personality. They went to the mission fields with a corresponding aloofness. When they entered the mission fields, they exhibited the same superiority complex against the “dirty” and “naked savages”, as they saw them, in the field.

Negative Missionary Attitudes

Despite the missionaries’ fidelity to the Great Commission, their racial, cultural, technological, moral, and religious ethno-centrism reflected on the indigenous people of Melanesia. This most-embarrassing, and, at times, horrifying, episode is found in the historical mission literature. The Christian message of God’s equal love of all men was obscured and coloured by their biased attitudes, which overrode the central objectives of their lives. Out in the field, missionaries conceived that Melanesian

⁴ D. B. Davies, *Slavery in Southern America*, [publishing details cannot be identified].

backwardness was equated with sinfulness. Sinfulness was seen as related, if not, indeed, equivalent to, their social, cultural, technological, and religious inferiority. The theological fact that sinfulness had stained the whole human race, in the very “essence” of its existence, was simply evaded, perhaps unconsciously or ignorantly. Otherwise, whites would have realised their oneness with Melanesians.

Filthiness and nakedness were seen as explicit manifestations of Melanesian darkness and paganism. But, the increasingly stinging sins of human nature, flourishing in the missionaries’ backyards at home, were overlooked in the name of “Christendom”.

On the basis of the above insights into the missionaries’ attitudes, let us ask further questions. If these are the facts, how did the missionaries really interact with local populations in the mission fields? According to reliable historical analysis and evidence, the negative actions and attitudes, transmitted to the local people, appear to outweigh the positive aspects, but later, we will draw another picture showing that it was impossible to do things in another way.

If Melanesians were the first missionaries to a foreign land, would they not follow a similar way, when endeavouring to bring the gospel to the heathen? An objective analysis is just as vital as a subjective one. We are evaluating facts, just as we would evaluate any missionary or historical event, in any time or place.

Yet, we cannot evade understanding missionary attitudes and experiences, merely out of emotions, such as pity and respect. Therefore, we must allow facts to speak for themselves. The missionaries, no doubt, believed themselves to be the “most advanced”, the “know-alls”. Upon such premises, their missionary adventure was possibly a “rescue-party operation”, or a “state-of-emergency operation”, an attempt to save the “lost tribe” and the “dying race”. This attitude is exemplified in the life and activity of their pioneer missionary, C. W. Abel, whose policy has been summarised thus: “The remnant must be gathered into mission stations . . .

and trained to become as Europeans, who had learnt to survive and multiply.”⁵

In fact, he saw nothing good in the local culture and religion. What would you conserve from the local institutions, where everything was contaminated by darkness and sin? Nothing, except the people, who were precious souls for the vacant heaven. As far as possible, he sought every opportunity to eradicate the native way of life. He established a rehabilitation centre – a new social, cultural, religious, and economic institution, alien and contrary to traditional patterns – in 1920, and, in that year, he predicted an accelerated rate of depopulation. “He predicted that, unless the rate of decline were arrested, there would be nothing left of the British Pacific empire in 100 years’ time, but a few aboriginal names, attached to the bays and headlands of the islands.”⁶

Prompted by this circumstance of rapid depopulation, he began bargaining, stealing, and snatching children, in order to rescue them before they perished, and went to eternal fire.

The result of his rehabilitation programme permitted the disintegration of traditional society and its order, and the reformation of the natives situated them in a totally-alien culture and society. He maintained his mission with the imposition of his inflexible and harsh discipline towards the regenerated. This new setting heightened discrimination between male and female, the convert and the non-convert, in order to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians. The poor natives imitated his actions, and heeded his words, in a mechanical motion, without understanding their philosophy and implications.

Similar characteristics of thought were depicted a little earlier in the life, service, and convictions of John George Paton, another British Presbyterian missionary in the New Hebrides. John G. Paton was a

⁵ David Wetherell, “Monument to a Missionary: C. W. Abel and the Keveri of Papua”, in *Journal of Pacific History* 8 (1973), pp. 30-48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

contemporary among the British missionaries, who believed in the darkness and heathenism of the Pacific Islanders.⁷

When he was with the people, he felt their nudity was a mark of heathenism, while covered bodies, like himself were Christian. (I hope God was, and is not, naked?)⁸ After some time of settlement, he never seemed to indicate, in his personality, any evidence of change. Being in the field should mark some changes, at least, but this never happened at all. When writing to his Home Mission Board in Scotland, he described how the natives were enveloped in all the superstition and wickedness of heathenism; how all the men and children went in a state of nudity, the older and younger women wearing grass skirts or leaf aprons, like Eve in the Garden of Eden. He regarded the people as being exceedingly ignorant, vicious, and bigoted, and almost devoid of natural affection.⁹

One can read similar sentiments on page after page of his classical autobiography, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides*. He offered real service, but not without disservice to the helpless natives. Through him, if at all, was there going to be any regeneration; it was the poor superstitious natives, who had to repent from paganism, and enter into Christianity by becoming total foreigners in their homeland. But not John G. Paton; he was an enlightened child, redeemed already. He did not need to be born again, because he was born again already. Heaven's room was prevacated for him, without an iota of doubt.

Within the same vicinity, the typical missionary is said to have refused to eat with the natives, or even let them enter his house, nor could he deal socially with them,¹⁰ although they were genetically not inferior to him. From the east to the west, from the islands to the mountains, from the valley to the seas, similar stories flow, one after the other. Missionaries

⁷ See, for example, R. E. Reid, "John Henry Holmes in Papua: Changing Missionary Perspectives on Indigenous Cultures: 1890-1914", in *Journal of Pacific History* 13-3 (1978), pp. 173-187.

⁸ Paton's views are reflected throughout James Paton, ed., *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography*, 2 vols, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890, vol 1, p. 108.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ Forman, "Foreign Missionaries in the Pacific Islands during the Twentieth Century", p. 43.

saw our ancestors, or even our parents, only through their pitiless and scornful eyes. On one occasion, in Dutch New Guinea (now Irian Jaya), speaking angrily to the people of their unceasing tribal warfare, which butchered countless people, Mel Maynard, an American Baptist Missionary, shouted:

You men, rotten through and through! God is angry with your sins, your killing, and your pride in victory! If you don't stop it, God will cut you down.¹¹

God was always on the side of missionaries, even in their sins, but not with the natives. He was a white God. If the primitives wanted the white God, they had to be socio-culturally, and religiously, "circumcised". Others were very paternalistic, while, at the same time, they helped the natives to be themselves. In the name of protection from outside alienation and intrusion, they became another form of alienation.¹² A very clear example of this was Revd J. F. Goldie, an Australian Methodist. He is called "Commander in Chief" by Ronald G. Williams, in his book on the United Church, because of his paternalistic attitude.

The native bigmen and chiefs were treated as the most important people, by the laws of the local societies, yet Goldie (and missionaries everywhere) subordinated them to the rank of little children. The white missionaries became superior, and took over the chief's position and status. It was a pity the chiefs sold their pride and dignity to cunning missionaries, who did not consider them worthy. Along the Papuan coast, John Henry Holmes, a British missionary, viewed the native religions as nothing but total misunderstanding of human religious faculties.¹³ He considered the *Eravo* system, and the *Herehe* system, and other cultured elements of the Elema people, to be saturated with dirt and filth.¹⁴ Polygamy, a popular

¹¹ Shirley Horne, *An Hour to the Stone Age*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1973, pp. 11-13, 68-121.

¹² Esau Tuza, "Cultural Suppression? Not Quite!: a Case in Solomon Islands Methodism", in *Catalyst* 7-2 (1977), pp. 106-126; 109ff.

¹³ Cf. Reid, "John Henry Holmes in Papua", p. 184.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

institution of marriage in Melanesia, was considered to be an “unbridled animal passion”.¹⁵

So far, most of the missionaries saw it this way, because they kept their “social distance”, and viewed things as foreigners. They had not entered deeply into the very existence of the natives. Others were ignorant and uninterested. Why waste time on superstitions, animism, and fetish religions, which are of no value at all? Therefore, they began to teach the natives moral norms, and moral codes, like the ten commandments, imported from Europe. Yet Albert M. Kiki’s book, *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime*,¹⁶ would claim that the ten commandments were already in existence among his people, before missionaries put their foot on our land. If carefully studied, such moral codes could be found all over Melanesia. But the missionaries had no time for this.

Without any doubt, most like-minded missionaries anticipated the time when all local institutions and designs of life would be completely demolished. Whenever there was a complete discarding of their own cultures and religion by natives, signified by destroying of idols, this was a vivid expression to the missionaries, an authentic symbol of inward conversion.

Colonial Attitudes

Can we easily dismiss the issues like this? What about the government officials, planters, and traders, who forcibly exploited the Melanesians, for their political and economic gain? It is, therefore, fitting to make mention of them here in passing.

Psychologically, at an ideological and philosophical level, the government officers, planters, and traders shared the same mentality of a “superior race”, in the midst of the Melanesians, and the black people as a whole. The planters and traders exploited the natives at will, for raw goods, whenever they could find any:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁶ Albert M. Kiki, *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime: a New Guinea Biography of Albert Maori Kiki*, Melbourne Vic: F. W. Cheshire, 1968.

Many Europeans believed that Pacific Islanders would die out completely. Some deliberately introduced communicable disease to accelerate the process. At other places, guns were introduced to tribal warfare to hasten depopulation.¹⁷

These economic animals took our ancestors away as slaves. Government officers were political puppets of their imperial governments. They, too, had a negative outlook on our people. The civil service structures they developed were carbon copies of the ones established at home. Such set-ups highlighted dichotomy between “primitives” and “civilised” people in the field. So, in order to develop the natives, they attempted to reproduce, among primitive people, their own ethnocentric patterns of civilisation.¹⁸ And that is where we are today. This ideology has survived, even to this day, in the language of first world, second world, third world, and fourth world.

Government workers, at some points, cooperated and worked closely with the missionaries. They saw the utility of Christianity, in order to achieve their political ends, which were to ban the people from all inhuman activities, like cannibalism, widow strangulation, tribal warfare, and, thence, to establish law and order, promote peace, unity, stability, freedom, and congregate the diversified tribes, clans, and families, to build a strong national community, superintended by one centralised, political body. In doing this work, both government and mission carried the burdens together. But, in doing other things, especially the condemnation of people’s traditional cultural way of life, the government did its best to conserve them, though they were sometimes ignorant. The great Governor of British New Guinea, and friendly supporter of missions, William Macgregor, worked well with missionaries. The Government Anthropologist, Francis Edgar Williams, helped the colonial government understand the local people and their culture. He made careful surveys of various cultural groups of the Papuan Region.

¹⁷ Sione Latukefu, “The Christian Presence: Plus and Minus”, in *Tides of Change: Pacific Christians Review Their Problems and Hopes*, Vaughan Hinton, ed., Melbourne Vic: Commission for World Mission of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1981, pp. 10-12.

¹⁸ Cf. Amirah Inglis, “*Not a White Woman Safe*”: *Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby, 1920-1934*, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1974.

In his paper, “Sentiments and Leading Ideas in Native Society, Report No 2, Port Moresby, 1932”, he discussed which cultural practices should be conserved. They are outlined as follows. (He identified 12 in all.):

1. Native conservation: The attachment to tradition.
2. Corporate self-respect: Pride in culture.
3. Individual self-respect: Self-display.
4. Loyalty to the group: Clannishness.
5. Intra-group sentiment: The sympathetic sanction.
6. The sense of shame.
7. Sentiment towards relatives by marriage.
8. Respect for seniority.¹⁹

Many government officials, together with anthropologists, did their best to preserve Melanesian cultures. In other situations, government officials and missionaries were against each other, but there were times and places where they happened to be working together.

Moreover, another fostering of colonial white superiority was depicted very well by the barricading, by the white community, of the Papuan population from entering Port Moresby town in the 19th century. Natives were squashed up in the barracks for accommodation. They were not even allowed in the town. Many colonialists considered black people as “half-devil and half-animals”, as is well portrayed by Amirah Inglis in her book, “*Not a White Woman Safe*”: *Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby, 1920-1934*. She discussed the relationships between Europeans and Melanesians between the 1920s and 1930s.

Sir Hubert Murray, the Governor of Papua, even passed racist and sexist ordinances in 1926, to keep the natives away from raping or

¹⁹ Francis Edgar Williams, *Sentiments and Leading Ideas in Native Society*, Port Moresby PNG: Edward George Baker, Government Printer, 1932.

attempting to rape white women. Intermarriage between a black man and a white woman was prohibited.

Relationships in the white world, especially between missionaries, planters, and traders could be devastating. Planters and traders fearlessly drained out much that was of value to Melanesians, and missionaries, with their uttermost strength, battled against this exploitation. Christianity and its bearers, in working for justice, became barriers to economic expansion. We see these disputes between them clearly in the “Kanaka labour trade”, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which exiled masses of Melanesians, as slaves to Australia and Fiji. To the planters and traders, the application of the word “Kanaka”, meant “uncivilised primitives”. Therefore, they tried to depopulate the locals with bullets and diseases, and accommodated them in ghetto-type houses. They were sold as commodities, and made into “human tools for human beings”.

If Melanesians were of any value, their worth was only in their economic utility, just like a horse, or a water buffalo. The poor Melanesians never knew that they were being deceived and seduced, when they were raided and hunted out by the whites, who sailed them away to distant lands. They were carried away, as our hunters carry wild possums and cassowaries, pressed and caged nicely, at the bottom of the ships. When Melanesians were offered steel axes, knives, calico, etc., they were blinded, not seeing that, by the same token, they were hooked, as fish were hooked, by bait on the line. These attitudes, prejudices, and clouded assumptions, which led to maltreatment and subjugation of them, below the dignity of human beings, were based on, and ignited by, one and the same ideological principle: racism, white supremacy, and superiority over and against Melanesians.

This ideology grew up strongly from the 17th to the 19th centuries, and today, though under cover, it is inevitably still operative in whites, who are actively at work in missions, the government, and in private employment in Melanesia. In response to this past treatment, the indignation felt by indigenous elites against colonial masters, whether government officers, or missionaries, traders, or planters, is evident in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Irian Jaya, today. Has there never been any criticism coming from educated

Melanesians? There has been, though criticism has been narrowly confined to missionaries, over the destruction of local cultures.

Yet, many more Melanesians, who don't find any outlet to release their repressed antagonism against whites, battle conscientiously within the depths of their being. There is no reason why we young Melanesians repress and suppress so much of these anti-colonialist feelings; we should express them. But many educated Melanesians simply overlooked them, and became "neo-colonialists" in turn, black masters of our own people. They inherited white ideology and lifestyle, and did away with the pregnant Melanesian ideology and lifestyle.

One final remark: what most colonial servants intended to do was to set up their empire in our land, that is, another Britain in Papua, another Germany in New Guinea, another France in New Caledonia, another Britain in the Solomons, and another Indonesia in West Irian. They said: we will protect you from outside intrusion, but they were highlighting their political prestige in colonialism. They protected the natives, so that traders and planters could drain out our natural resources, and deprive our people. They beat and whipped, killed, and hung, our people. This side of the story is simply overlooked by those who are such enthusiastic critics. I beg them to say something in this area, too.

Positive Attitudes of Missionaries

Although the history of Christianisation in Melanesia seems to present so much repugnance and disgust, we must assert out appreciation and recognition of the important and beneficial service of missionaries to Melanesians, even to the point of them generously giving of their lives. Many missionaries, from the inception of the missionary era, possessed human integrity, respect (beside their biased notions), and genuine sentiments for the local people, and their cultures. Their undoubted commitment to God, and their love for the locals, is clearly depicted in their selflessly giving up their lives, to be eaten by Melanesians, to be killed by malaria, and the like.

Like Job in the Old Testament, for many, this meant losing their children, wives, husbands, their closest kin, and their glory and gold, for the sake of the gospel. They loved God by loving man, and vice-versa.

There is no other way, except loving God, and loving man; the missionaries held these together. Would they have laid down their lives for Melanesians if they hated them? Certainly not. They laid down their lives because their love for the Melanesian people was so great. That love overrode their selfishness, and helped them to forget self, for others. The love in them was not a human invention, discovered in logic, or ideologies, derived from an ethnocentric love. It was theocentric love. Human-centred love would have been exhausted, and died out. But, because their love came from, and was based on, theocentric love, it never faded away in the process of history, because the $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (*theos*) is the source of love, whence all love radiates, and emanates to the whole universe. He was there throughout, supplying all their needs, inspiring and challenging their short-sightedness, and enlightening dim visions, to do greater things than could be done on human grounds.

Despite their aloofness, receptive missionaries found wisdom, and learnt humanism, in an unindividualistic communal life of sharing, and they cherished spiritual truths and values, in the midst of diverse peoples' religious and cultural institutions. When they did this, sooner or later, they discovered that local traditional religions taught them a greater sense of spiritual vitality and awe than, perhaps, their own form of Christianity. Local religions weren't merely a product of superstitions and devilish quests. This is true, although missionaries felt quite antagonistic, in the beginning of their work with local culture and their religions. But, by the 1970s, John Henry Holmes could write that

the Papuan was a "religious being", whose beliefs united him with the missionary in a "religion, which inculcated a belief in spirits, established an order of life, mystically bound to the mind and will of the spirits, and an unshakable assurance of the immortality of the soul".²⁰

What made him alter his previous anti-culture position? Where and when did he begin to be interested in the local people? Actually, it was in the year 1898, while ministering to the Elma people of the Gulf Delta. During this time, things began to be different from before. He was firstly

²⁰ Reid, "John Henry Holmes in Papua", p. 173.

motivated by his endeavour to learn the local language. This effort led him to master six vernacular dialects in that region. This monumental effort helped him thrust through the existing linguistic impediments, which existed between himself and the indigenous population.

His vernacular fluency helped him to communicate effectively. He was able to penetrate into the thought patterns, sentiments, beliefs, and the very secrets of the people. Through his in-depth interaction and dialogue, he soon discovered the purpose, meaning, and significance their social, cultural, economic, political, and religious institutions and ceremonies held for them.

Often, at nightfall, he sat by the campfire with the old men from the villages, and heard them reiterate their myths, legends, and folklore to young initiates. In addition to his acquisition of the language, he read James Chalmers' book, *Pioneering in New Guinea*.²¹ In this book, James Chalmers particularised a reference to the local belief in the one "Supreme God" among other relative sub-gods and deities. This insight enhanced, in Holmes, a zeal for a thorough reexamination of, and patient dealing with, the people's traditional religious beliefs, rather than despising them, as merely polysaturated with superstition. Following his reading of Chalmers' book, he eventually preached a sermon to his congregation, on the evening of that same day, on Acts 17:23, Paul's famous sermon at Athens.

Furthermore, it was not long before Holmes became a student (not in the formal sense) of ethnography. He collected raw ethnographical data for publication in the *Journal of Anthropology* in Britain. The arrival and assistance of Charles Gabriel and Alfred Haddon, who were both outspoken in favour of anthropology at that time, gave him a phenomenological perspective on local religions and cultures. This influence made it impossible for him to cling to his former beliefs and attitudes. He was compelled to begin the work of "culture-conservation". He took the lead, and encouraged people to use traditional arts and artefacts to ornament church buildings. He introduced the *Eravo* houses on the mission stations (which he had outrightly hated before), where village men came and chatted, smoked, and chewed betel nut (as they had previously done outside

²¹ James Chalmers, *Pioneering in New Guinea*, London UK: Religious Tract Society, 1887.

the church). And incentives were given, by allowing the people to perform traditional cultural dances on the mission stations.

Besides these efforts, he was a chief defender of the Papuan religion, and of people, and their culture. This is well portrayed in his published works. He was a remarkable apologist for the Papuans.

Many other missionaries, even if they did not compromise their principles, had a positive perception of the people. They not only penetrated, by way of study, but became “immersed” within the depths of the local mentality, and participated in the ceremonies of their social institutions. Practical involvement added weight to missionary enthusiasm. For one, William Bromilow identified himself with the local people and their culture, and, in so doing, sternly challenged his colleagues to win the friendship of the people, as he was doing, rather than remaining foreigners. On these principles, he propagated a policy, with the purpose of eradicating the foreigners’ biased accusations against the human integrity and dignity of the local people. He accepted and valued the people as they were. He kept on appealing, throughout his service, that the natives were as other men, that their customs must be as respected and honoured as anybody’s.²² To him, neither the foreigner, nor the locals, were any better or any worse than the other. Both were sinful before the judgment, and were forgiven equally. Two main factors helped him to have this view of his missionary activity. 1: He was not new as a missionary, as he had been a missionary for ten years in Fiji, prior to this appointment in the Milne Bay district. From Fiji, he took with him a wealth of experience, badly needed in Papua. He brought with him Fijian ideas, social habits, and words (e.g., *Lotu* for church in Fiji, *Marama* for Ma’am = mother, etc.). 2: Immediately after his arrival, he began to learn the Dobuan language. The Dobuan language was valuable, as it gave him access and understanding, and even enabled him to penetrate into the mysteries of the Dobuan society.²³

²² Ronald G. Williams, *The United Church in Papua, New Guinea, and Solomon Islands: The Development of an Indigenous Church*, Rabaul PNG: Trinity Press, 1972, pp. 190-193, 247-248.

²³ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1982, p. 233.

Gradually, he became an authority on the Papuans and their culture. As John Henry Holmes had, he discovered their mythical history, their patterns of morality, their aspirations, and setbacks. The Dobuans did not regard him as a missionary: he was called a “Dobuan”. He neither blamed nor condemned the natives. He was a great man, the great *Saragigi* – the man with the removable teeth!²⁴ The objective of his missionary work was aimed at the “reformation” of man, in his social setting, and in “destruction and reconstruction”; to transform man from within, and not from without, seeking to redeem, but not to abolish.²⁵ His most far-reaching contribution was his translation of the Bible into the Dobuan language.

In discussing Bromilow of the Methodists, the Anglicans come to mind immediately. It is impossible to pass on without mentioning great figures, like Bishop G. A. Selwyn, the founder of the Melanesian Mission, Bishop Patteson, the first Bishop of Melanesia in the Solomon Islands, and Bishop Stone-Wigg of New Guinea. Bishop Selwyn, from the initial stage of his mission, had an approach, which was unique among the missions. He developed a skilful programme to Christianise unchristian Melanesians, from within their cultural context, and not from without. His philosophy of missionisation is rightly “extractionist”, as identified by Darrell Whiteman.²⁶ He extracted from the Melanesian communities young men with potential, converted them, and took them away to be educated in Auckland, and later the Loyalty Islands, hoping that, after their learning of Christianity and European culture, they would return to their homes, and evangelise their fellowmen. But this missionary principle failed, eventually, as the scholars, after their return, found it difficult to evangelise, being a minority. Most of them lapsed back to a traditional way of life.

However unsuccessful was his method of evangelism, his non-destructive and perceptive recognition of Melanesian culture is self-evident. Prudently, he learnt, from past destructive missionary operations in the Polynesian and Micronesian Islands, not to repeat the same mistakes. With great energy, effort, and commitment, he respected the people, and their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Williams, *The United Church in Papua, New Guinea, and Solomon Islands*, p. 191.

²⁶ Darrell L. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries: an Ethnohistorical Study of Social and Religious Change in the Southwest Pacific*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1983, pp. 99ff, 147ff.

culture. He did not subordinate their culture, or treat the people's lifestyles as inferior, following the popular notion of the day, because, as he stated:

I have been looking for a "savage", in the English sense of the word, and have never yet met with one. And I come to understand the languages of these Islanders, or to converse with those who know them, I find them to be men of like feelings with ourselves; influenced mainly by the same arguments, guided by a sense of right and wrong; deliberate in council, even more than ourselves; clear in defining, and tenacious in maintaining their right; often wrong in their premises, but generally reasoning rightly upon such grounds as they have. Ferocity is no more part of the nature of a "savage" than it was natural for the French people, in the highest pitch of civilisation, to shed blood like water.²⁷

He shared that sympathetic philosophy of Bromilow. Melanesians were not entirely destined to be doomed, as held by other missionaries. Bishop T. C. Patteson rightly fitted into the pattern of Bishop Selwyn. He was committed to the idea that:

the Melanesians must be evangelised by the Melanesians, and the notion that Christianity was a "universal religion", and, as such, was not culture-bound. He believed that its basic doctrines were applicable to all cultures, but that the formal application of these doctrines would vary from one cultural context to another. To force an "English Christianity" upon Melanesians, he asserted, was "a great mistake".²⁸

Again and again, he strongly emphasised a tolerant approach to the conversion of the unchristian Melanesians. He saw, in the traditional religions, a spark of potential faith, from which Christianity should begin. Traditional religions were not merely pagan superstitions. But as he said:

We must fasten on that, and not rudely destroy the superstition, lest, with it, we destroy the principle of faith in things, and beings unseen. I often think that, to shake man's faith in his old belief, however

²⁷ Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries*, p. 111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

wrong it may be, before one can substitute something true and right, is, to say the least, a dangerous experiment.²⁹

Both Selwyn and Patteson had firmly separated Christianity from civilisation, whereas other missionaries lumped the two together, without distinction. They were concerned to teach the basic elements of Christian tenets, and leave the rest to the people, themselves, to decide. They avoided the tendency to insist on conformity to external influences. Their vision was that Melanesians must, of necessity, become Melanesians, and not Europeans, or Polynesians. They upheld trust and confidence in the Melanesians, as being as intelligent and capable as anybody, when they were given sound education. Their real appreciation of, and sensitive approach to, Melanesian culture does not mean that they accepted cannibalism, and other inhuman traits, in the same way as they did other customs. Certainly, they would condemn, but not without preliminary investigation of the practice. The missionary principle, or methodology, of these two men has been the guidepost in the investigation of Melanesians in the Solomon Islands.

Moreover, the Anglican missionaries in New Guinea appeared to have followed, not identical, but similar, principles in their initial, and later, missionary endeavour. This is well portrayed in the life of Bishop Stone-Wigg. He was sensitive and empathetic to Melanesians and their traditional culture. His attitude was flexible, and he concentrated on reforming the local social conditions, and helping them to face up to treacherous Western influences, which were already on the way. This does not imply that he was not concerned with external influences, but it does mean that he was not religiously conservative and parochial in seeking immediate conversion from heathenism. Instead of regarding the struggle to plant the church in stubborn soil as a battle between good and evil, these Anglican missionaries looked for a foundation in traditional society, which could be used as a basis for Christianity.³⁰

In all his dealings, Stone-Wigg did not want to abolish the local culture. Instead, he tried to consecrate the traditional village life into the church, whose theology would not be elaborate, but would issue in genuine

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Christian life.³¹ In his view, the only difference between the Melanesian Christian and the non-Christian Melanesian should be religion, but, as far as social, cultural life was concerned, they would not differ.

Other evangelical missionaries have criticised him for being reluctant to change the traditional socio-religious order of the people. This criticism never persuaded him to change his outlook, and method of mission. It could be said of Bishop Stone-Wigg's missionary operations in Papua that he always maintained his confidence, in respect for, and recognition of, the Papuans, as people of a noble race, equal with all in the human race.

Now, we shall go on to the Methodist mission, which went to the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, and used similar missionary methods. The combined Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM) of Australia and New Zealand had been an island mission, with many years of missionary work. With the wealth of experience gained, it was better equipped not to repeat the same mistakes. These people first learnt the languages, which bridged the communication gap. Most missionaries, such as Revd Gordon Young, R. Barnes, John Hutton, and Bill Griffiths, got to know the locals well through fluent Huli and Angal Heneg. They translated portions of the scripture, and introduced education, at the earliest opportunity. They lived on local food, and participated in feasts, and encouraged Mali dances. Three of them, Bill Griffiths, George Buckle, and John Hutton, joined in the Mali in 1964 at Hoyabia. The honour they received on that day from the Huli people was far more than any Huli could ever have received. The memory of the sight of them is not forgotten by the Huli. These missionaries told the people it was good, and so people should be happy to dance. This dance is practised, even today, in the church. The Catholics have also Christianised the dance, and they dance in December, every year, to celebrate Christmas, just near the pulpit, while United church Christians dance in tune to mark the Christian calendar year.

Another contribution the missionaries made, which had a positive effect, was the utilisation of traditional chant tunes, with the incorporation of Christian biblical, theological, and catechetical words and meanings. These chant tunes were the only form of hymn singing in Huli up until

³¹ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 248.

1970.³² They also adopted, and Christianised, the Mendi chants, in like manner. In Mendi, this is the only form of hymn singing in the church today. Furthermore, they encouraged the continuation of pig feasting (or *nogo hendere*) in the church, to conclude the Mali. This was done in the early stages. They adopted the Huli's supreme God, *Datagaliwabe*, and Christianised Him. They have contributed positively, although their evangelical tendency was demonstrated, to some extent, with the abolishment of some cultural traits, i.e., of certain traditional gods, bachelor initiation rites, etc.

The Baptist Mission, which appeared in the Huli area about the same time, condemned almost all the vital cultural traditions of the people. The Mali, traditional chants, funeral feasts, or anything that was Huli in origin, was contaminated with heathenism. This was the inclination of the Seventh-day Adventists, too. And they criticised the United church and Catholic church as still being heathen.

Generally, the paramount contribution of all missionaries remains their efforts and attitudes, with regard to local cultural phenomena of dehumanisation. All missionaries, despite denominational differences and barriers, basically risked their lives, voluntarily, in dangerous situations. The indigenous practices of cannibalism, infanticide, widow strangulation, inter-clan warfare, and murder were greatly reduced by the message of the gospel of Christ Jesus, although the practices seem to be still alive in some areas today.

It is inconceivable how these cruel activities could have been stopped without the missionary efforts, together with the gospel. They did their work with sweat, tears, hunger, and thirst, with much pain and suffering, even unto death. They were ready to die for the people they loved. They preferred "costly grace" to "cheap grace". Their love and concern was unselfish. They knew this was the only way out, and they set their self-giving in service of another, as an example for Melanesian Christians.

How can a Melanesian respond to these examples of life and service? How can a Melanesian express, in language, this love of missionaries, even

³² Williams, *The United Church in Papua, New Guinea, and Solomon Islands*, pp. 288ff.

to risk their lives and die for the people they loved? The missionaries brought to the dying, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, and the lost, the message of eternal love, peace, and comfort, together with material supplies. They identified themselves with the people, by eating, drinking, and living with them.

Simultaneously, we must give credit to the government, too, because it contributed as much as the missionaries. For both church and state participated in the pacification, bringing peace, unity, and development of the Melanesian people. The church used the “word” (gospel), and the state used “words” (law) yet, more often, sword and whip. The state appraised the work of the missionaries, but, nowhere, have missionaries ever been given a compliment for their close cooperation with it.

One factor contributing to the positive missionary approach to Melanesians was the declining emphasis on the “theology of hellfire”, and “total depravity” of the people. Missionaries began emphasising the theology of the “Fatherhood of God towards all men”, and the “Brotherhood of all men in Christ”.

The second factor of missionary receptivity towards Melanesians was their observation of past missionary experience, where mistakes were made. Those who went to new mission fields learnt not to repeat the same errors.

The third factor, was the influence of an educational background. Those who had a broad education were more liberal, while those who had a limited background, were of the rigid conservative style.

These changes were largely due to changes occurring in England, America, and Europe, when anthropology, and the study of comparative religion, were strongly recommended to Christian missions, and their training establishments, by anthropologists. However, changes to individuals, while on the mission fields, inevitably took place, without the influence of their sponsors. Changes mark the end of one era, and the beginning of another era. This was true in Melanesia. Many bad cultural practices had to be abandoned, and replaced by new ones. The end of the traditional view and order of society meant the emergence of a new social

order and cosmos. This was clear in the introduction of mission stations, which operated as new societies, in the midst of Melanesian societies, but away from the local society and its setting, despite efforts that have been made to be closer to the traditional societal model.

To these mission stations, victims of all types of human suffering – run-away slaves, orphans, children of chiefs and ordinary people, boys and girls, friends and enemies – all flooded in, in search of refuge. They lived, worked, ate, and drank together, but this would have been impossible in the old order. These places served as a base for the extension of Christianity. It was at these places that many new and good things were introduced and taught. The mission stations served as a catalyst to bring about a new society, a new people, and a new community.

For example, let us look at C. W. Abel. He was noted for his work on what his opponents called his “hothouses”, especially the Kwato mission. He was the first promoter of “racial brotherhood”. He tried to bring whites and blacks together as equals. He taught his students to dance the European foxtrot and waltz, and later they were found to be dancing with the families of the white missionaries. A visitor, who was there, marvelled at the sight of white and black in harmony.³³ Amirah Inglis talks of the cricket match between Abel’s boys and the white communities in Port Moresby and Samarai.³⁴ The Moresby cricket test match was the first black and white sport ever played in the history of Papua. Abel’s aim was “consciousness-raising”, instilling pride and human dignity. He challenged the white world of superiority and aloofness with a simple message of “racial brotherhood”. He tried to bring whites and blacks together as brothers. This effort was his contribution towards the abolition of racism.

John G. Paton, although he always kept natives under his thumb, fought bitterly against the European slave trade. He persuaded the British government, in Australia and England, to take tough measures to ban the human alienators. Paton, and many other Christian missionaries, either evangelical or liberal, defended the rights of the natives to hold their land, sea, and all other natural resources, free from foreign exploitation. Missionaries, when consulting on land issues, represented the helpless

³³ Wetherell, “Monument to a Missionary”, pp. 31, 35-36.

³⁴ Inglis, “*Not a White Woman Safe*”, pp. 92-93.

natives. If they did not, who would? This is to mention but a few things – to show the valuable contributions rendered by missionaries. They may have been at odds at one end, yet right at the other. Humans they were, and not perfect, with trials, ignorance, prejudices, tolerance, good efforts, successes, and defeats; they tried to make out of their lives the best they could.

Local Estimations of the Missionaries

Up till now, the discussion has been centred very much on the missionaries, as against the local culture and people. Now we have reached a point where we will have to give some account of the Melanesian interpretation of the white missionaries. Generally, it is both bewildering, and amazing, to see their views of missionaries, even though some had been living with them for many years. Melanesian notions, in regard to missionaries, whether recent or long-time residents in Melanesia, remain similar, despite geographical distance, and differing socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. Broadly, most Melanesians held the view that missionaries were supernatural beings, angelic beings, re-incarnations, or, at least, mysterious and uncommon creatures.

For instance, the patron of Kwato Mission, Charles Abel, was neatly constructed into a mythical figure, because he was conceived to have a personality, which had characteristics of a super-human, above that of local magicians. He was viewed as having power over nature, i.e., he could stop the wind, cause death, sickness, and famine on the land. He was an occult leader.

Not far from where Abel was, the Dobuans identified Bromilow as incredible, because of his “removable teeth”. For fun, sometimes Bromilow took out his teeth and placed them again in his mouth. This was something which caused wonder and amazement. To the natives, who had no idea of false teeth, it was something beyond any explanation. After his long absence during the war, he returned from Australia. Immediately the people saw him as a mythical ancestor, who was returning to them after his death. He was also reckoned as the chief of their society, replacing the old ones.

Many others, who write on this subject, do not state the reasons why the local people perceived the missionaries as they did. However, the assumption seems to be that the kinds of interpretation given by the natives about the missionaries reflect some pre-existing order of explaining things. None of the books used here produced any evidence to support this view. Here is an example to illustrate this point.

When people died, it was thought that they changed into new cultures again. They obtained new pigmentation, and became new, just like the snakes. On the basis of this background, the Manu Mau people of Papua thought the first missionaries were angelic, or heavenly, beings, as they saw their white clothes, which were also shining bright. They saw the angelic beings as the reincarnations of their dead ancestors.³⁵

Take another incident. When the Huli people of Southern Highlands saw the missionaries, they thought of them as *Honabi* or *Kekeali*. The Hulis believed that, under the ground of the sacred worship centres, *Honabi* used to reside. *Honabi* was believed to have white skin and white clothes. This fitted in well with the advent of the white man with white clothes. To the Huli, the missionaries (or anybody European) are *Honabi*. *Honabi* means “white”, and it is used even today. It is not an invented or introduced word.

Conclusion

Missionary activity was motivated by the Commission of Jesus Christ, and by the constant renewal and challenges of Christian communities, particularly in the civilised countries. From one point of view, this was the predominant influence on missionaries. However, as a by-product of their societies, in their missionary operations, they carried with them their cultural traits and biases. Their views and attitudes were very much influenced by their own backgrounds.

In their lives and service, both positive and negative sides coexisted. On the negative side, they thought that every local person, and his culture, was primitive, heathen, lost out of the evolutionary progression, and just a diminishing remnant.

³⁵ Tom Araki, a student friend, provided this piece of information.

On the positive side, many identified themselves with the heart of the cultural and religious life of the people. They lived, ate, drank, and participated joyfully in the local way of life. They became one among the natives, and no longer remained as foreigners. Some did not even spare their own lives, but gave themselves entirely, withholding nothing. They brought the gospel to Melanesia, not the easiest way, but the hardest way. They took seriously Christ's words: "The road that leads through the open gate leads to destruction and vanity, but the road that leads through the narrow gate leads to life" (Matt 7:13-14).

So, through the narrow gate, missionaries brought the gospel, and Melanesians have found life, life in abundance. Yet, despite the gospel that has been brought, and the immeasurable services rendered to Melanesians, many misunderstand and overlook the missionaries, and what they gave us. Especially, young elites of Melanesia, severely criticise the church and the missionaries. This issue was raised earlier in the introduction of this paper. Their misunderstanding and criticism falls into three different categories. One is those university-educated groups, who are alienated by the secularisation of the Western world. They may, or may not, have any religious affiliation, and its presence in Melanesia is conceived of as a religious imperialism, or, they say, the coming of Christianity and its missionaries has broken down our cultures, and replaced them with foreign ones. The good things done by missionaries are simply taken for granted.

Secondly, there are the theologically-educated elites. These groups see that Christianity did destroy much of the Melanesian cultures, stating that Christianity came "wrapped in a Western cultural form". Therefore, they want to unparcel it, and allow Melanesian culture to accommodate Christianity, rather than continuing the cultural circumcision. They say we must not follow early missionary models of destroying culture. There is a positive criticism.

Thirdly, there are individuals, or movements of people, who criticise Christianity, outrightly, as a foreign religion. Their advocacy is an attempt towards revitalisation of indigenous religions. They understand Christianity as one religion among others, like Islam, Hinduism, etc. So, the traditional indigenous religions should be given proper honour and acceptance, such as we give to other religions.

All in all, in what took place, we see both good and bad things. We can, therefore, no longer only criticise or praise them, but we can do both, because they did what they could. They produced good things together with the bad ones. They have created goodness, but not without evil deeds. A seed must die in order to grow and bear new fruit, and so some parts of our culture have been ruined that good ones may spring forth to life. The missionaries were humans, as much as we are, that is, fallible and not otherwise. We have learnt from their mistakes. Had they had better knowledge, as we do today, they could have done better. They lived in their time, and we live in our time. Let the past judge itself, and so, today, as tomorrow will be judged by itself. But this does not mean that we must abstain from criticising them; we have to, in order to improve and better understand reality, as it ought to be.

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