

TERTIARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

Two Case Studies

TERTIARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN RELATION TO THE MELANESIAN INSTITUTE

Gernot Fugmann

1. Introduction – Basic Thoughts on Tertiary Religious Education in PNG

The Melanesian Institute goes out from the self-evident presupposition that academic reflections on religion and theology in Melanesia are necessary, quite simply because religion is an integral part of traditional life and culture. This is conceptualised in the preamble of the constitution, and anyone who has gained insights into the worldview of Melanesian people will readily acknowledge that this religious outlook on life is still vibrant and essential among a majority of the people. Much of what is happening within society is, therefore, interpreted from within this traditional religious framework. To elicit such interpretations, and bring them to the surface by research, has been one of the main objectives of the work done at the Melanesian Institute. It is our opinion that the churches and the scholars need to enter into a dialogue with this religious epistemology on the local level. We think such noted Melanesian philosophers and leaders as Narokobi and Momis have expressed what anthropologists, such as Lawrence, Burridge, or Strathern, have shown in their studies, namely, that the religious debate on the local level is vital for the identity and dignity of the Melanesian people. By recognising this debate, and entering into a dialogue with it, the churches and the scholars acknowledge the nobility of the religious traditions still important to the Melanesian peoples.

For a long time, the churches have been labelled as being insensitive to this traditional heritage. This has certainly been the case, perhaps more frequently in the past, when some missions and missionaries have made every effort to obliterate traditional religion for the sake of implanting

something totally new. In the meantime, churches and missionaries have learnt a lesson, quite often the hard way, by having to deal with resurgent religious movements and nativistic phenomena among people thought to have been thoroughly “Christianised”. Consequently, churches have taken this challenge seriously, and it is part of their response that the Melanesian Institute was founded, and actively sponsored. So, now we are trying to address precisely such topics, relating them to issues of the wider society, as it changes, and it taken up by the dynamic of development and culture clash.

In discussing the future of theological education and religious studies, it might also be time for the churches to throw back the ball to academics asking if they are really giving due respect to the religious and ethical questions which evolve from the discussions of the people at local and national levels. The confusion is great, and the law and order problem might only be the tip of the iceberg yet to become manifest. We are not suggesting that the churches have come up with an ideal way of taking up these issues; we do, however, need to recognise what is at stake. Without such academic and theological dialogue, important aspects of history, traditional philosophy, and law are in danger of being lost, and an identity gap will emerge within society. In our opinion, this is already the case, as tertiary students are trained to be mere technocrats, without the slightest reflections on ethical issues and national values. It would be unfair to state that tertiary academic institutions were totally devoid of such reflections, especially if the influence and work of scholars, such as Garry Trompf, are considered. He was, however, never able to realise his vision of a religious department in the UPNG, running up against barriers of ideological prejudice.

Churches should demand religious and ethical reflection in dialogue with Melanesian tradition on the tertiary level. This reflection needs to be a serious academic challenge for its own sake. Where are the critical voices which remind the churches of their genuine task? In the European and American tradition, they come from the tertiary academic institutions, from prophetic voices such as Niebuhr, Kaesemann, Kung, or Boff. The religious and theological reflection on the tertiary level is ultimately to the advantage of church and society, because that is the place where people dare to think new theological thoughts, and have insights based on interdisciplinary studies, and not weighed down by restricted and myopic

denominational views. Young scholars need to be exposed to such ethical and religious themes, the basic precondition for any kind of Melanesian Theology to develop and flourish. They need the historical perspective of how humanity has dealt with ideologies and philosophies, and the open debate of how they relate to their own tradition. This is part of an ongoing global academic discussion, which should not exclude Melanesian academics from examining the interrelatedness of religion, philosophy, history, law, medicine, and technology. The 1986 Waigani Seminar on Ethics of Development has, for instance, made it sufficiently clear that the whole realm of ethics in society is getting more complicated as technology and development are becoming complex. These are fields being explored all over the world. They are fields in which both the churches and the academics need to stimulate and challenge each other. Or, we might ask, what contribution Melanesia has to make in the global discussion of contextualisation or liberation theology? Where is the specifically Melanesian contribution, based on its past religious experience? The seminaries are hardly the place where such reflections are fomented, because they are justifiably and primarily interested in equipping students with a solid pastoral education.

Let me conclude this plea for a tertiary theological or religious studies programme by stating that the Melanesian Institute would certainly welcome and support any concrete steps undertaken in that direction. For the sake of the churches, the academic world, and our own Institute, we believe that such a religious studies programme, in whatever way it might be implemented, will be to the advantage and benefit of all.

2. The Melanesian Institute in the Context of Theological Education

Although an associate member of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, the Melanesian Institute is not involved in basic theological education towards the ministry within the churches. This is not its mandate.

Originally founded, in order to cater for the need of expatriate missionaries to gain a deeper appreciation and knowledge of the people, the culture and the religion in Melanesia, the Melanesian Institute has since developed this teaching assignment, and has undertaken basic research at the request of the member churches. Both teaching and research, therefore,

determine the agenda of what is done at the Institute, which also includes the publication programme. As a part of the background research for the orientation courses, the Institute has, consequently, always been involved in the ongoing dialogue between traditional religion and the Christian message, as it comes into society in the wake of modernity. The study of religious movements as phenomena of Melanesian epistemology is part of this research, and has received international acclaim. More recently, the Melanesian Institute has again taken up the whole issue of how modernity is influencing and changing traditional values and worldviews. The research project on marriage and family life is a case study in this area. In the near future, the Melanesian Institute hopes that it will be able to present the results of this study, enabling the churches to form a clear picture of the change which is taking place. Hopefully, they will then be able to come to conclusions as to how the churches can respond theologically and pastorally.

The Melanesian Institute staff also consider it to be a vital part of the Institute's role to understand itself as a forum, where an open dialogue can take place between scholars, leaders of churches, and society. Here, new avenues of research are tested, issues of social concern are debated, or people are brought together when consultations are called for.

It is within this framework of research, teaching, and consultation that the Melanesian Institute could understand its role, both with regard to the seminaries, and in relation to a tertiary religious education programme. The Melanesian Institute is more than interested in communicating the results of its research to the pastoral and theological curriculum of ministerial and religious education. In some instances, this is already being done through the use of Melanesian Institute publications as text books.

To conclude, let me become concrete by offering co-operation in three areas.

1. As mentioned above, the Melanesian Institute has always understood itself as a consultative forum, where various people, parties, churches interested in a specific topic, can come together for discussions. The ecumenical profile of the Institute has predestined it to have a denominationally-neutral image, open to dialogue, and conducive to overcoming

barriers and gaps. As such, the Melanesian Institute is willing to facilitate further discussions between the seminaries, churches, the MCC, and, if necessary, with the relevant people of UPNG.

2. As of next year, the Melanesian Institute is offering a tutoring programme for post-graduate scholars, both of the seminaries and the university. If, for instance, a student is scheduled to go overseas for further studies to do an MA or a PhD, the Melanesian Institute is willing to negotiate devotion of time, tutoring, and supervision to assist the students in their research preparations. With our new study centre, the Institute has the facilities available, and, as of next year, a staff member will be set aside for this programme. This is a programme we are eager to get under way in co-operation with the seminaries, their respective churches, and the University. Because of the ecumenical context, and the ongoing research, we find that the Melanesian Institute is ideally suited to help prospective Melanesian scholars.
3. As of this year, we plan to set up a publication programme for outstanding student theses from the seminaries of MATS. Each year, we plan to ask the major seminaries to submit one significant thesis to a special screening and evaluation committee, which will then nominate one of the theses submitted to be published. In consultation with MATS, the Melanesian Institute will set up such a committee, which will then set standards and the criteria, according to which, the theses of the students will be submitted and judged. We are hopeful that this publication programme will promote the quality of theological reflection, and give an incentive to those students who are the potential teachers of tomorrow.

We hope that the co-operation, which we are offering, will serve the interest of the churches, and certainly want to see it linked to the overall efforts in connection with tertiary religious education in Melanesia. From the Melanesian Institute's point of view, we see the setting up of a tertiary religious education programme as vital and stimulative, both for the churches and society. It will promote ecumenical dialogue, invigorate

theological and religious reflection, challenge those areas of society which need an ethical discussion, and relate to the worldwide theological debate.

CURRICULUM REFORM AT NEWTON THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

A Discussion Paper Prepared by the Faculty

Newton Theological College opened at its present site at Jonita, eight km from Popondetta, in 1981. A rural site had been chosen in preference to one proposed at Port Moresby, so that the students could make their own gardens. It was expected that most students would be ordained to serve in rural parishes, and so would need to keep in touch with village life. The site, and the need to make gardens, are major constraints upon the curriculum: they both encourage fellow-feeling with village life, and impede contact with town life, and with facilities such as 24-hour electricity.

The College recruits from all the Anglican dioceses, but, in recent years, most students have come from the diocese of Popondetta (Oro Province), with one or two, at most, from each of Aipo Rongo (the Highlands), New Britain, Port Moresby, and Dogura. The majority of students therefore speak Orokaivan or Ewe Ge. At present, we have nine students in the "final year", and 11 in the second year; there are 13 married students and seven single, and the families of married students live with them on site. There are five lecturers: three, including the Principal, Fr Walter Siba, from Melanesia, and two from England. At present, the subjects taught include Doctrine, Liturgy, Philosophy, Psychology, Spirituality, OT books, OT History, OT Theology, NT Theology, Life and Work of St Paul, Pastoral Studies, Ministry Today, Homiletics, Contextualisation, Church History, Missiology, and Christian Ethics. Among subjects usually covered in the first year are World Religions, with special reference to Islam in Indonesia, Sects, and Melanesian Religion. The staff are already beginning to co-operate more over teaching their separate subjects, in order to prepare for a more-integrated approach.

During 1986, the staff felt the need to examine and develop the curriculum. After various special meetings, at which ideas were discussed and agreed upon, recommendations were put forward to the College Council, which met on November, 8, 1986, as follows: