A POLITICAL THEOLOGY: MELANESIAN MILEU

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I

A search for appropriate political theology must be a task that can be compared to Dr Theodor Reik's famous psychoanalytic title, *Listening with the Third Ear*, and has a three-headed person as a cover design. The third person turned out to be himself, because it is a psychoanalytic insight, that a true psychologist is one who can listen to himself.[1] Listening with the third ear is exactly what we need in our search for appropriate expressions of our convections.

We are embarking on a subject that must be a concern to every Christian and citizen. No responsible person can avoid it. That is why we must ask anew, what is true in our experience, and contexts, that true for the Reformation milieu? Luther, and Reformation, constitute immense works, that one immediately faces the likelihood of reading too much into the milieu, or deducing too much of the same. But this should not mean taking a passive attitude towards issues of theology and politics that were unique to Reformation milieu, as much as it is a valid concern for our contexts. And, in order that we may do justice to history and the traditions of the West, as well as to ourselves, we must consider traditions other than the West, for concern with politics is a universal one. I wish, therefore, to present a brief description of the Melanesian political milieu, or rather, the Papua New Guinea milieu, and then to make a few comparisons with Luther's responses.

II

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea states, in part:

> *We the people of Papua New Guinea . . . united in one nation . . . pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions, and the Christian principles that are ours now. . . . We, the people, declare ourselves, under the guiding hand of God. . . . And . . . that all power to the people. . . . And community interdependence are basic principles of our society.*[2]

At lease three important aspects of the statement are worthy of note. They account for history, traditions, Christian principles, and community interdependence. Since Christian principles, and community interdependence, were enshrined in the constitution, there is a presupposition that all tribes belong to the same family, and share the same history. Structures, therefore, are not as important as the spirit and principles, on which the nation was founded. It is the spirit of unity and interdependence among the people and tribes. The Constitution, as such, reflects the values of the people, and, in a more-religious sense, the beliefs of the people. Statements of values and beliefs, in turn, reflect the people, and their identity. Let us how consider this preamble was reborn, by looking briefly at the culture, religion, and history.

1. The culture milieu

The relation between the church and the government can be described as close, even though there are marked differences in structures and objects. The close relation can be attributed to cultural milieu. There were traditional forms of centralised government, with chiefs as head of the tribes, but they were not our forms of central government, with warriors, medicine man, and gardeners. What mattered

most, was not instruments of a tribe state, but how best the welfare of members were served and guaranteed. Therefore, in large parts of Papua New Guinea, in the past, as well as the present time, we speak of government for and by the people. A tribal state, and its structures, were established, not to serve itself, but to serve its people.

An extreme example can be drawn from the traditional payback practices in many parts of Papua New Guinea. When the life of a member is endangered, the whole tribe is endangered. The whole tribe retaliates, by payback, or compensation demands, whether every member participates in the act or not. The power to execute peace, war, or justice was collective, not directed by written codes, but by the collective power of reason. People had their ethical code of conduct and wisdom, as complex as any written codes of modern times. They were as capable of horrific crimes as any human being, and as capable of godly virtues. People were neither religious nor unreligious; worldly nor spiritual, for they belonged to one and the same order of creation. I hope this will be made clearer, when we look at the religious milieu.

2.   The religious milieu

A Papua New Guinean, like the rest of his/her Melanesian counterparts, is a religious person. Religion was the central value, and provided the framework for daily work and relationships between the members of the clan, with the deity, with the environments (sea, rivers, and mountains). As an ultimate concern,[3] religion is the complex whole of man, with his surroundings and relationship, which all constitute his existential concern. Religion was the way of life, and life was religion. There was no separation of the secular and the worldly, or the spiritual and the worldly. For religion is part of the great drama of bio-cosmic[4] life. Religion, in this sense, plays the role of maintaining the proper balance in created order and relationships.

Another way of describing the Melanesian milieu, may be described in the three senses used by a current writer on Melanesian religions: religion is a system, a personal attitude, or a complex of symbolic systems. As a system, religion is part of the social structure, and the political structure of beliefs and rituals. In this sense, the major religions of the world, including Christianity, as well as ethnic religions, may be included. And, as part of the social structure, religion plays an important role in both the spiritual and secular spheres of life; hence, dichotomy exists, but only superficially. For life belongs to the one Creator and Father.

In another sense, religion is a personal attitude of an individual towards God, or any object of one's religion.[5] Politicians, civil servants, bishops, and pastors can become objects of people's religion, as much as the structures which put them there. These public servants, from both the church and the government, can actually become gods, if only little gods. This is apart from the honour and respect all authorities deserve. However, they will be either be servants of God, or servants or the devil. This is the essence of the spiritual meaning of the two kingdoms. "By their fruits, you will know those who are My servants."[6] Jesus was invited to leave His humanity, to usurp the kingdom from the Father. To leave His humanity, to pursue self-glorification and power, was to abuse His role. In a real sense, it means to cease to serve God the Father, and to cease to serve the people.

Many religious values and beliefs are expressed through symbols.[7] In this sense, we may speak of the whole structure of "church" and "government". As symbols, they both point to something. That something may be the good life, peaceful relationships, material well-being, or power. They both represent the same reality, in that they both exist as instruments of God. The difference between the two may

be a matter of degree in quality of service, and experience of fullness of life, rather than a choice of one or the other. True denial of self, and the world, is measured by a faithful heart, and the service of love, rather than merely outward gestures. A good politician, or a minister of religion, does not become either by right of inheritance, but by faithful service to his neighbour, and obedience to God.

3.   The historical milieu

From the very beginning of mission contacts, Christianity was the only universal religion that penetrated the largely tribal, and ethnic, religions of Melanesia. The gospel of peace, reconciliation, and unity provided new attractions for the people. Those who responded, were converted to the new faith and life. The response was both individual and collective. Conversion of a chief, or an elder, meant conversion of his whole tribe or household. Those who held political positions, traditionally did not change the old with new title, but took on an added role. In many cases, the new role was a religious one. For them, they were made both political and religious figures. Because, for them, it was like Joshua, who declared, "as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord".[8] Tribes then became the church, because tribes received the new faith, not individuals. Tribes become the church, and the church was the tribe.

Christian Keysser, missionary to the Sattelberg people from 1899-1921, was the first to recognise this, when he said: "The tribe is, at the same time, the Christian congregation, and considers itself as such, and acts as such."[9] Even those individuals, who declared allegiance to the Christian faith, were, in a sense, churches within a "church".[10] An individual cannot be a Christian, apart from his natural ties (tribes), for that would be suicidal, and inhuman. Either the whole tribe is converted, or they must face the consequences of being ridiculed as not being members of one's family. Many were caught in a paradox.

Am I for Christ, or Caesar? Am I for church, or government? Etc. Thus, like the church in Corinth, we break the body of Christ, and the order of God's creation. But the world, and its people, are one family of God.

III

For Christians, Christian social responsibility is not an option, but a duty. Christians are called individually, and corporately, to bear witness in the world. This may be through the priestly function of all believers, or a pastoral office. It may be reflected through political office, or civil service. From the point of view of cultural milieu, the question of the relation of church and state is not a question of separation of two spheres, rather it is fulfilling of duty to God. Demarcation of territories is not the essential issue, but the quality of life and service, characterised by love and obedience under God. The substance of the issue is not one of spirit against body, or church against state, but serving God against mammon – children of the heavenly Father, or servants of darkness, the Devil.

It would be quite safe to conclude that Luther's concern, in his polemics on Christian responsibilities, both for ministers and lay persons, is a life of faithful service, according to the call of office, be it office of the Word or politics. All are under the rule of Christ, and His Word, which must prevail, under whom all authorities in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, shall bow. Thus, in dealing with our paradoxes and dialectics, we may, all the more, listen with the third ear, to the third person.

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NOTES

[1] Theodor Reik, Listening with the Third Ear: the Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst, Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1948.

[2] Gernot Fugmann, ed., Ethics and Development in Papua New Guinea, Point 9 (1986), p. xi.

[3] Paul Tillich, Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue, D. Mackenzie Brown, ed., London UK: SCM Press, 1965.

[4] Ennio Mantovani, ed., An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point 6 (1984).

[5] Ibid., p. 26.

[6] Matt 7:15-20.

[7] Mantovani, Introduction to Melanesian Religions, p. 29.

[8] Josh 24:14-15.

[9] Christian Keysser, A People Reborn, Pasadena CA William Carey Library, 1980, p. 213.

[10] I use "church" here in a symbolic form sense, or typological form. Referring to natural order, particularly the tribal units, with all its spiritual and political concerns, as a total vehicle of God's activities.