

Making Sense of the Oneness of Life: a Melanesian Christian View on Creation

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Why talk about the integrity of creation? It seems, though, that we are responding to the modern crises of the disintegration of creation. A lot of ink is now being spilled in Christian literature, on trying to recover, or, perhaps, explore, appropriate theological reflections, to provide a strong impetus for concerns on justice, peace, and integrity of creation. The World Council of Churches, through its Church and Society sub-unit, has much to say on the “integrity of creation” aspect, in particular, Dr Preman Nile’s little book, *Resisting the threats to life*, (WCC Risk Series), for example, is an excellent summary of stories that may reflect the disintegration of creation. Niles also further notes, from a biblical perspective, why Christians should resist such threats to life as an “integral part” of their confession of faith.

But there are also others, like Jim McPherson, who say that, on the matter of the environment, and its despoliation, “Christian systematic theology has been strangely silent”.¹ Furthermore, he also argues that the responsible body of WCC, focusing on the aspect of integrity of creation, “has been unable to find suitable theological categories to address its agenda of environmental concern”.²

This paper will neither repeat what others have already said on the theme, nor will it propose a theology on the integrity of creation. Others have done that, and I think they have done it well. I am unaware of any discussions on the impact of Melanesian cultural concepts of creation to contribute to Christian theology, and that issue is the subject of this article. It will highlight Melanesian thinking on creation.

What are the Melanesian cultural perceptions of reality that will contribute to the thinking of other people? This question is prompted by a sense of urgency for those of us, who are still experiencing the continual disintegration of our tribal land bases; for those of us, who watch the ever-increasing attack on the earth, and the environment, with much pain. The suffering, on our own doorstep, only tell us the

¹ Jim McPherson, “The Integrity of Creation: Science, History, and Theology”, in *Pacifica* 2-3 (October 1989), p. 333.

² *Ibid.*, p. 334.

powerful prayers of the oppressors. What are our responses, as Melanesians, to those prayers?

The Melanesian concept of creation must be understood, in terms of people's relationship to the earth and the environment, with all their contents, visible and invisible. It is an affirmation of life's unity – the interrelatedness, and the interdependence, between human life and nature. According to Melanesians, a world without human beings is an incomplete understanding of creation, and vice versa. Each is connected, and is dependent on the other. Each is made possible by the other. The interaction, that takes place between nature and people, provides a meaning of life. Consider this Papuan mythology of creation, for example:

Melanesians say that, previously, human beings had no coconuts. When they cooked taro, they had no coconut milk to put on it.

In the early days of creation, there used to be a village near the sea. The men, who lived there, went fishing every morning. But they did not catch many fish – except one man, who went by himself. He could catch more fish than he could eat.

“This is very strange indeed”, the men said. So they had a meeting about it. While the meeting was in progress, a boy stood, listening, and thought of a plan, and he put it before the gathering.

“Tomorrow, I will follow him, and see what he does.”

The next day, the boy did as he planned, and followed the man, till he came to the seashore. Then the boy hid behind a tree, and watched the man carefully.

This is what he saw: the man put down his fishing basket, and then took hold of his head with his two hands. He pulled and pulled, till his head came off. He placed his head on the sand, and he walked into the sea, till the water came up to the middle of his body. After he had stopped in the water, the man bent down till his throat was level with it. Then the fish came swimming in great numbers, and swam down the man's throat. When he had enough, he walked slowly back to the shore. He shook the fish out, and put his head on again. The boy, who witnessed all this, was afraid, and he ran home quickly, and told others about it.

The next day, all the men went quickly to the seashore, to see what happened. They saw the man take off his head, and get into the water. Then, one of the men ran out from the trees, and, taking the head, he threw it into the bush. After a short while, the owner came out of the water, and began feeling for his head. When he could not find his head, he ran back into the sea, and changed into a big human fish. He swam out of sight.

A few days later, the boy, who first saw the man, started to think about the head. He went into the bush, to try to find it. When he came to the place, where it had been thrown, he found a palm tree growing. Nobody knew what the tree was. It had nuts on it. The men, who saw this, then were afraid to eat them. But one of the women took a nut, and ate the inner part. When the others saw that she was not harmed, they ate some as well.

Melanesians say, if you look at the nut, when the husk has been taken away, you can see the face of a man. I can tell you, it is the face of the man, whose head became the first coconut.

A new meaning of life is expressed clearly in this creation story, as both nature and people interact. One could say, as humankind opens itself up to nature (and vice versa), it elicits possibilities of new life – life in its fullness, life complete. In other words, in the interaction with the environment, persons discover that they are being interrelated and interdependent to creation – all that is living. Both nature and people, according to Melanesians, are inseparably integrated. Bernard Narokobi makes a similar point, when he speaks of religious experience. He says: “An experience, for a Melanesian, I believe, is the person’s encounter with the Spirit, the law, economics, politics, and life’s own total whole”,³ and I would add, “with nature, as well”. For Narokobi, this is the “Melanesian’s vision of cosmos, and its relationship with it.”⁴ But, I would further add, that this is what life means in Melanesia.

Life has to be seen in its totality. (This is the meaning of creation.) Therefore, the notion of life, is the bottom line of Melanesian thinking.

One will notice, from the legend, that, according to Melanesian thought, creation is that which is full of life, new life. Life becomes transcendental. It is creative and recreative. Life moves beyond the horizons of limitedness to explore

³ Bernard Narokobi, “What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?”, in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia, Point* (1&2/1977), p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

new dimensions, while, at the same time, provides new and fresh possibilities. The transcendental life is not, altogether, a life of nature. Life is also sacred, that is, from a Melanesian perspective. Life is sacred, because, by origin, it is sacred. Since the Melanesian cosmos is all spiritual, life then becomes an issue for spiritual concern. Like other Melanesians have said, a Melanesian is born into a spiritual world. Life is consecrated towards upholding that religious order. A Melanesian is aware that he or she exists, and functions, within the world of spirits.

Within this given understanding, the origin of life is understood as divine. In the context of its divine origin, human life is necessarily oriented around religious and moral implications. Thus, the questions of human life cannot be considered without, first of all, answering political, economical questions. I suppose this is what Narokobi means when he says “total experience”.⁵ And, because life has to do with the transcendental experience of creation, and provides possibilities for human life, it is quite right for a Melanesian to say that life serves as the context, in which structures for meaning are enhanced. Life becomes the framework that relates things religious, and things profane; that orders social structures, and patterns for living for the society; and that binds the community and nature in one common bond of relationship.

From this perspective, Melanesians do not segregate nature and human life. If we lose our land, for example, we lose our place in creation. If we find ourselves alienated, or exiled, from our land, we find ourselves at odds with ourselves and with all creation.

Two years ago, I was pastorally appointed to Karawa United church of Central Province, to be the minister of that local church. At certain times, I was invited to join the men for hunting and fishing expeditions. As I recall, on my first hunting trip, I was dazzled by what they told me. Pointing to the land we stood on, and waving his hands to the trees, and the river, one of the men said to me, “All these you see and hear provide the people of Karawa with all basic needs.” He added that the land and the environment provided food, medicine, and material for building a house, or a canoe. He further stated that the land we were standing on was sacred, because it was the dwelling place of the “*Palagu Para*” (the big spirit). In other words, land and environment is everything, and “all things”, for a Melanesian.

This understanding of being inseparably interrelated and interdependent to nature gives Melanesians a sense of reverence and care for creation. Melanesians

⁵ Ibid.

treat nature with care and reverence, because nature is not dead. It is alive and creative, and is also recreative. It is continuous. If nature is not given reverence and care, then it would mean nature does not exist. Then no life would exist. The element of continuity in life would not give Melanesians a new sense of meaning in life. Furthermore, since nature must interact with people, human life is also treated with reverence and care. This reverence for human life confirms the very existence, and growth, of nature. Melanesians' perception of reality is that nature is alive, and is maturing in all dimensions, with ever-new human possibilities.

The Melanesian notion of life opens up to the concept of community. This is a question of the meaning of creation. In other words, the concept of community arises out of, and is rooted in, the understanding that nature and people belong to one another. It is that network of life that produces the ethical-communal relationship of human life. Thus, the notion of life serves as the framework of interpretation of the world. What goes on in the world concerns life. Life becomes the springboard for all things to exist, for creativity and recreativity. To use Greek terms, life is the alpha and the omega of all creation. Life is continuous, it has no ending. It constructs living structures, and patterns for the society. In short, life is the basis for Melanesian community life.

A long-time Protestant missionary, and one-time politician, the late Revd Percy Chatterton, notes the "gut" of this life, when he writes from the Papuan perspective. He comments: "What is this Melanesian way? It is, or was, a life-style, which was communalistic and egalitarian, making its decisions by consensus, and achieving its aims by cooperation. . . . Within these limits, it was possible to arrive at decisions by consensus, because the people making them were interrelated and interdependent.⁶ The communal aspect of human life draws from the common source of life. That source identifies power of living. It informs a meaningful way of life. So it is logical for Melanesians to address problems of discontinuity in life, or problems that promote disintegration. It would only make sense to the Melanesian to say that the notion of life is to address political, economical, social, and spiritual questions, for the good or evil of the society. At the extreme, one could say the idea of community derives from the understanding that people and nature are one – people own nature, and nature owns people. The communal aspect of human life does not find meaning, or make sense, without discovering its oneness with nature, which is the source of all life.

The idea of oneness, for Melanesians, sets the commonality of the community. All of creation, all of life, is one, every creature in community, with

⁶ Percy Chatterton, *Day That I Have Loved*, Sydney NSW: Pacifica Publishing, 1974, p. 118.

every other, living in harmony, and security, toward the well-being of every other creature. Therefore, our commonality is in community. All people are children, and members of a single tribe, heirs of the single hope, and bearers of a single destiny. Melanesians acknowledged that, since human life and nature are one, persons are bound together in a common loyalty. It is consequently inconceivable to proclaim this commonality, based on life's oneness, on the one hand, and on the other, allow for what Preman Niles calls "the threats to life"⁷ to shake the foundations of what life is for a Melanesian. It would simply not make sense anyway.

Furthermore, the commonality in community is also bound by a common experience. That common experience is rooted, and is informed by, that oneness. It reminds us, once again, that the distance, and strangeness, between nature and human life do not exist. Since Melanesian thought on community refers to the oneness in life, certain symbols of life are shared to enhance persons to live in communion with each other and nature. Sharing is a pattern of living that affirms, and prepares, people for understanding each other. A life of sharing, in the notion of Melanesian community, develops and maintains the identity of each and everyone. It is the experience of the corporate identity I am referring to. And this is lived out in at least two ways.

As pointed out earlier, in brief, firstly, the corporate identity is experienced relationally. Melanesians are caught up in institutional structures, customs, and kinship networks. It relates people into relationships in time and space. According to the Melanesian notion of community, a person exists only in relationship to others. This theme is not only the key to the understanding of unity of nature and human life, it is central to the well-being of the relationship of people among themselves (no wonder the term "wantok system" is an enemy to contemporary life-style). The relational theme enables Melanesians to take risks. It invites them to explore the unknown. It frees them to engage in that reciprocity of giving and receiving. Bride price, for example, along the Papuan coast, is forced by this notion. Even when the price is so high, people are pulled into intimacy. These structures affirm and enable the continuity of our communication, and make visible our interrelatedness.

Secondly, corporate identity is lived out spontaneously. This theme is most appropriately reflected in the use of the word "celebration" to describe occasions that are not normally experienced – occasions that go beyond the experiences of

⁷ Preman Niles, *Resisting the Threats to Life*, Geneva Sw: WCC Publications, 1989, especially chapters 2, 3, and 4.

human life – encounters with the spirits, the sacred, the land, the sea. In 1988, I witnessed a great feast-dance in honour of the “*Palagu Para*” at Karawa village. It began with a few tentative, seductive drum taps in the still heat of the early afternoon, and worked slowly up, for long hours, to a climax of non-stop dancing and singing. Then, following the distribution of food, collected the next day, on the sacred platform, the celebration ended. The kundu drums, headdresses, and ornaments, were put away safely for some future celebration. The participants went back to a more mundane life.

The life, lived out through this aspect of community, is a moment, not a state. It is not hierarchical, but egalitarian. It is not segmented, but holistic. From this perspective, then, participants are known to one another, in the commonality of their submission to the power of moment. These spontaneous moments of community provide the intimacy of the transcendent, and allow for the transformation of the immediate. Disintegration has no place in this Melanesian experience of oneness that renders solidarity, and renews vision. Such moments also remind us of whom we are. They renew our commitments to the source of our corporate life.

Such a way of living is full of life, which is founded in the oneness of life, where nature and human life unite in the ongoing creative and recreative process, thereby presenting humankind with ever-new possibilities. It would be audacious for Melanesians to claim for themselves any relationship that claims to hurt that commonality. All are no more than one with each other, through one common experience.

Problem

This article, in a way, shows the concept of creation, from traditional Melanesian thinking, and the structure of living informed by that worldview. We noted that such a concept of the world, and structure of living, is informed by the understanding that all creation is interrelated and interdependent to/with each other. The structure of living, which emerges from this theme, is characterised by a life of care and reverence for others and nature. In short, political, economical, social, and religious life is rooted in, and is governed by, the concept of interrelatedness and interdependence.

Can we suggest that the concept of a united life be recommended as an alternative thinking to today’s life – people, nature, modern technology, and science? In the Pacific region, for example, the problems of science and modern technology are characterised by nuclear weapons. Does this demand we look seriously at a different way of thinking and existence in the world? It seems,

though, that the present definitions of life, and models of living, informed by that worldview, is guiding people to self-destruction – both the destruction of human life and nature.

Melanesian thinking, and relating to self, others, nature, and the ultimate, is an appropriate alternative, because it has the potential. It really does point to a foundation for a doctrine of creation, and the creative and recreative dimensions of the human society.

If the Melanesian notion of life can inform manners of living, can we allow it to inform and regulate all structures and action of the ministries of the church? To name a few: theological education curriculum, preaching, pastoral care, and evangelism. It is interesting to observe that the “bottom line” of our practices in those ministries is well isolated from the Melanesian concept of the “oneness of life”.

Somewhere along the line, something has prevented the enhancement, and empowerment, of such ministries. Perhaps I am thinking along the lines with the late Revd Joe Gaqurae, in his introduction to the article “Indigenisation as Incarnation: the Concept of a Melanesian Christ”, where he states that, “Christianity came with Western civilisation. . . . At times, local people saw Christianity as identical to Western imperialism.”⁸ In other words, the West introduced a new system of thinking, and structure of living, foreign to Melanesians. This is the problem. This cultural imperialism was taught in schools, and through evangelism, in the churches. So the faith system of Melanesians was disoriented. Consequently, Melanesians’ relationships to others, and to nature, become conditioned by this new faith system. So when Melanesians’ thinking, and structure of living, was disoriented it ruined their perception of reality, which forms their way of life. This is what foreign cultural imperialistic attitudes did to Melanesians.

As long as the imposition of foreign cultural views has its place, Melanesian hermeneutics will be isolated from our “guts”. Melanesians will only find a dichotomy, which will prevent them from understanding their own cultural assumptions, as given by that cosmology.

Today, the dichotomy between the Melanesian perception of reality and a foreign cultural system does not allow for the concept of “oneness of life” to be the guiding principal for life and practice.

⁸ Joe Gaqurae, “Indigenisation as Incarnation: the Concept of a Melanesian Christ”, in *Point* (1&2/1977), p. 147.

Conclusions

Hence, I begin to inquire into the Melanesian Christian perspective on the integrity of creation. The vision of life, which God intended, is no more than what has already been discussed in these concepts. “In the beginning, God . . .”, is a faith statement that provides the framework, and goal, for our exploration on the theme of the integrity of creation. It diverts the perspective that informs our understanding on disintegration, while, at the same time, affirms the vision of life.

Therefore, as Melanesian Christians, instead of being fascinated with the uniqueness of an individual person, we should be impressed by the common threads that spread through the human community. Instead of viewing society as a make up of individuals, we should perceive each person as a necessary part of the social milieu. Themes, such as, interdependence and interrelatedness, rather than independence, should dominate our attention and thinking. The notion of community should set the precedence, as an image for understanding the nature and meaning of existence, rather than personal identity. We do not deny the importance of the uniqueness of independence in individuality. No. Rather, we are taking seriously – more seriously – the view of the corporate body, based on the belief that everyone is responsible for everyone, everything is responsible for everything, everyone is responsible for everything, and everything is responsible for everyone.

The most powerful and formative of all human experiences, in other words, is to be found in our interrelatedness – interdependence with each other, with all of nature and creation, and with God. The oneness of life is what makes sense for a Melanesian Christian.

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