

BOOK REVIEW: *BOUNTIFUL HARVEST: THE CHURCHES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA*

Bountiful Harvest: The Churches in Papua New Guinea

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By Philip Gibbs SVD

Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2007, 128pp.

Father Gibbs made a real effort in collecting much information from various printed sources and interviews in order to complete the paper on Christian denominations in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The proof of this is the list of the accumulated data, placed on pages 120-128. His work has content of eight chapters. In the first stage, he introduces the reader to the basic facts about PNG, and informs on political issues, land, language, health, economy, education within the country, and comments on the spirituality of the people. He then moves into the religious situation of PNG society. Although, as he acknowledges, this particular study was done on the basis of various governmental reports: the National Statistical Office data and National Censuses. It is not easy to conclude why, at present, the mainline churches are slower in growing, and less attractive, than the other denominations (e.g., the Seventh-day Adventists → SDA) and religious groupings. He tries to answer that question on pages 43-44, 51-52, 56-57, 63-66, 111, and 118-119.

If anybody wants to get condensed information on the leading religious communities in PNG, one is able to attain this in chapter three of Gibbs' book. There, the author portrays, firstly, those churches, which count more than 500,000 adherents. He placed the Catholic church first, as this church counts almost 1,500,000 members. Catholic ecclesial history in the country is counted since 1882, although their first missionary attempts (1847-1855) were tragic. Today, Catholics are involved in many social and spiritual areas. Right now, the Catholic church faces specific problems with regard

to localisation in the field of leadership, particularly freedom and responsibility by the local clergy, as well as the lay people.

Secondly, after the Catholics, he places the Lutherans. From the very beginning of their missionary activity in Huon Peninsula and Astrolabe Bay in 1886 and 1887, the Lutherans were not of identical character, and they struggled. Their success was only noticed after the First World War on the coast, and then in the Highlands. At present, the Lutherans experience internal problems of leadership and understanding of the missionary dimension of their Christian faith. Too much politics within themselves is an obstacle on their way to unity (p. 40).

The next one, the United church is also a noticeable community within the whole country. Its original roots are fixed in the London Missionary Society (LMS), which successfully began the work in Port Moresby in 1874, and in the Australian Methodist church. This Methodist church commenced its mission in 1875 in Duke of York Islands, where the missionaries retaliated after the local people killed four Polynesian teachers in 1878. This denomination records a number of outstanding missionary figures, like George Brown, James Chalmers, William Bromilow, and Charles Abel, who brought their mission to a perceived status. The United church went through all kinds of transformations and affiliations, such as the Kwato church, the Papua Ekalesia, the Ela and Boroko congregations, and, finally, formed the church into its present shape. The biggest challenge for this denomination is that a large number of its adherents are leaving and joining the Pentecostal movements.

The fourth denomination, which – according to the 2000 government statistics – counts more than 500,000 of followers, are the SDAs, although their official figures are much lower. Despite their controversial interpretation of the biblical texts, characteristic understanding of Christian doctrines, severance, and fundamentalism, the SDAs still attract many Melanesians, who, in the past 30 years (since 1975), doubled the number of

its adherents. However, this does not mean that they do not face difficulties and challenges in regard to their relationship with culture, the issue of the proper inner formation of the devotees, and, in recent years, breaking away from the mainstream of official teachings and practices, they do face difficulties. These are the signs of the crisis, which began to enter the SDA's structure.

The author then turns his attention to those other communities with 100,000-170,000 followers: the Anglican church, the Assemblies of God, fragmented Baptists, the Evangelical Brotherhood, the Apostolics, and the Evangelicals of PNG. Together these six groups count not more than 750,000 members.

In chapters four and five, the reader can find condensed information on another 35 Christian organisations, present in PNG, with less than 100,000 members. Sixteen of them are the outgrowth of breaking away from other churches or missions, and some are local products within the country. The content of chapter five is especially interesting to read as it gives basic information, and shows what sort of religious groups are operating around.

Then, the next part of the book deals with other religious groups and religious movements: Bahá'í, Family Federation for World Peace, and Unification (Moonies from Korea), "cargo" cults, and occult movements. The final two chapters are about ecumenism in PNG, its practical implementation and development. Regardless of some denominations that are not interested in this sort of activity, generally the majority of the operating groups within the country are engaged, in different ways, in the field of ecumenism, especially in areas of health and education. So, it can be said that, at least, there is a platform for many denominations in PNG, where they feel together, and, in some extent, united. This is a positive aspect, as the health service is for all Papua New Guineans, in spite of their religious convictions, and education meets the needs of the youth, the future and hope for tomorrow.

The book *Bountiful Harvest* is very timely and important. Its significance is that it was written in a readable format, and the price makes this small book available to all (for PNG K10). The giant publications are more for professionals and advanced specialists, and for those with higher salaries. Gibbs' work should be recommended, at first, to those who do studies at seminaries, colleges, and various educational institutions, and, in later years, as pastors, ministers, or leaders in their respective communities. The work is suitable to be read by all Christians in PNG, as it is able to open eyes to those who know very little or nothing about Christianity, the church, religion, and their histories.

Despite the above-expressed credits for the book, the reader must be informed that there are some inaccuracies in the texts, and the title itself raises doubts, in regard to its appropriateness. In chapter one (p. 5), the author says that Jorge de Meneses called the present New Guinea – Papua. As it is known, de Meneses called the dwellers of the Island “Papuan”, and, in later years, from that title, the nation Papua derived its name. Then the Institute of the Foreign Mission, established in Milan in 1850, is not the same as *Pontificium Institutum pro Missionibus Exteris* – PIME (as the author suggests on pp. 5 and 33). PIME is the latest religious organism of apostolic life within the Catholic church, which was created by fusion of that aforementioned Institute of the Foreign Mission of Milan and of the Pontifical Seminary for Foreign Mission of Rome, founded in 1870. The merger of these two institutions took place in Rome, on the order of Pope Pius XI, in 1926. Finally, the LMS arrived on the South Papuan coast in 1874, not in 1871 (p. 5).

Concerning the matter of the title of the book *Bountiful Harvest*, this is another difficulty, and gives grounds for reservation. Can we really talk, and call the Christian missionary achievements, performed in PNG, as bountiful, since Christianity, itself, in this country, is so fragmented? There is no doubt that the Christian missions did, and still do, a lot in the area of social, political, economical, educational, and health issues. But, with

regard to the unity of Christians, and the doctrine of the universal character of the church, founded by Jesus Christ – still there are lots of confusions, controversies, and questions. It seems that, in PNG, things are getting worse, as the author himself, on page 7, says: “currently the number (i.e., of denominations) is difficult to ascertain”. Then, on page 21, he states that “there are almost 200 Christian churches and organisations in the country, many having different beliefs and practices”. Taking these data into account, the question arises: should not the author call his work *Controversial*, *Confusing*, or *Questionable Harvest*? Certainly, this is a matter for reflection, more from a theological point of view. Since Gibbs’ work is more of the religious studies’ character, his title, including the word *Bountiful*, might be applied, although this still remains under question.

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