TOWARDS A MELANESIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CONVERSION: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNAL AND INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR A MELANESIAN COMMUNAL WAY OF LIFE

Moses Bakura

Moses was a long-serving member of the faculty at the Christian Leaders' Training College. In 2008, he resigned from his position as Dean of Studies, Lae Campus, to return to ministry in his home area of the Lower Ramu in Papua New Guinea.

INTRODUCTION

Communal participation and living was an integral part of Papua New Guinea's (PNG's) Melanesian way of life for thousands of years before the coming of foreigners, and the introduction of commerce, Christianity, and Western civilisation. People did things together. Equal sharing was the emphasis in Melanesia, and no one was left poor. In outlining the eight-point plan for our nation, Sir Michael Somare – who was the Chief Minister of our nation straight after self-government – did not fail to affirm emphatically that this practice must be preserved.[1] A closely-related practice to communal participation in Melanesia is the pervasive relationship to their spirits. The spirits of dead ancestors, and local geographical spirits, were embraced as part of their cosmos.

Given a glimpse of what communal life was like then, this article aims to discuss how the implications of conversion can have a positive effect on today's communal way of life. To do so, this essay firstly defines and

---

[1] Michael Somare, "New Goals for New Guinea", in *Pacific Perspective: Journal of the South Pacific Social Sciences Association* 2-1 (1973), p. 1.

contextualises the process of conversion, and then looks at some of its 19th-century dynamics. It then considers what conversion means for Melanesians in PNG today, and reviews Stilwell's study, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion".[2]

In the process, the essay will also discuss additional theological issues that currently face converts in Melanesia, and points the way forward, before concluding. It will also, by way of illustration, give selected snapshots of some 19th-century Pacific missionary movements' contributions to conversion in the Pacific generally. The essay will, at times, refer to PNG cultures, such as the Kire[3] cultural and language unit, for further illustrations.

CONVERSION: CONCEPT DEFINITION, PERSPECTIVES, DIFFERENCES, AND STAGES

CONCEPT DEFINITIONS AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Various definitions of conversion are offered by Bock,[4] Snyders,[5] Weymouth,[6] Price,[7] and Barclay.[8] Without examining each of these, Hovey builds on Tippett's definition[9] in a most helpful way when he states that conversion is:

---

[2] Ewan Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-1 (1993), p. 29.
[3] A geographical area comprising 12 villages that speak the Kire language in the Bogia District of the Madang Province of PNG. The author comes from this area.
[4] Darrell L. Bock, "Conversion", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996), p. 118.
[5] John Snyders, "The Best of Two Worlds", in *Catalyst* 1-2 (1971), pp. 50-51.
[6] Ross M. Weymouth, "The Gogodala Society in Papua and the Unevangelized Fields Mission 1890-1977", Ph.D. thesis (Adelaide SA: Flinders University, 1978), p. 161.
[7] David Price, "The Protestant Understanding of Conversion and its Implications for Missionary Obedience", D.Miss. thesis (Pasadena CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 340.
[8] William Barclay, *Turning To God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1964), p. 25.
[9] Allan R. Tippett, *The Deep Sea Canoe: The Story of the Third World Missionaries in the South Pacific* (South Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1977), p. 42.

the process, by which a person turns from whatever was his/her primary allegiance, to place God in that position. This process, by the grace of God, begins long before the person is consciously aware of it, and continues throughout the whole of life. It is only made possible by Christ's death and resurrection, and is effective in a saving sense (regeneration) when that person consciously acknowledges that allegiance to God. From the time that primary allegiance has been changed, each decision and attitude will be subject to that allegiance, and the outward expression of this God-directed life, with all its ramifications, will, therefore, be in the forms that best express those meanings in that society.[10]

This description is well put, but very lengthy. It also seems very intellectual, and needs redefining for pragmatic Melanesian people. How would a rural Christian understand the concept, and its process, as expressed here?

Price cites Loffler and Cassidy in arguing that "the biblical study of conversion is complicated by the fact that there is no one word in the Old and New Testaments which covers the whole concept, so serious doubts about the validity of the term have been raised".[11] He also cites J. G. Davies' objection "to the term 'conversion' as a valid biblical expression".[12] It may be true that the continued use of the word conversion misleads many, and Price questions if conversion is a biblical concept, "is it an important one . . . and is it, therefore, correct to reject it?"[13] He further argues that a word-study approach, in the light of the above problems, is inadequate, if used alone, because both Old and New Testaments do give example of conversions. "There is no one word for it, because no one word can embrace its comprehensiveness sufficiently!"[14] Therefore, it is very clear that, though there is no one

---

[10] Kevin G. Hovey, *Before All Else Fails. . . Read the Instructions* (Brisbane Qld: Harvest Publications, 1986), p. 89.
[11] Price, "The Protestant Understanding of Conversion", p. 285.
[12] Ibid., p. 286.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

word for conversion in scripture, the reality of the conversion event is seen everywhere in scripture.

However, the problem with these definitions is that they seem to be from a Western perspective, depicting individual conversion only. The expectation of an individual's conversion, in a Western society, sometimes differs from that of an individual's decision in Melanesian societies. In Melanesia, an individual decision, made in isolation to a group's consensus, always has a ripple effect on everyone associated with it, because of the vibrant communal network. So, how do we balance this in the definition?

Hanciles expresses the same concern that a definition of conversion needs not only include individuals, but groups as well. He believes that:

> writers lay themselves open to criticism by depicting conversion as essentially an *individual* and *psychological* (or "interior") experience. Perhaps, due to an evangelical predilection, neither makes provision for "group" conversion, an approach considered more efficacious in contexts, like Africa *and Melanesia*, where "religion" is communally regulated, while the "interior bias" ignores both the significance of "context" and the variability of the phenomenon.[15]

What Hanciles expresses is out of a genuine concern for a recognition and inclusion of group conversion in the definition. What then should a Melanesian contextualised definition of conversion look like? What words should be used to define conversion, so that any simple believer in a rural village will understand what it entails?

---

[15] Jehu J. Hanciles, "Conversion and Social Change", in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, Donald M. Lewis, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 158 (emphasis added).

Contextualised Definition

When attempting to define conversion within Melanesia, we must firstly consider two important steps. The first step is to redefine the Melanesian Pidgin words *tanim bel* or *tanim bel pinis*.[16] These phrases are very vague in their meaning, and do not truly describe the change, and the process involved. The terms might apply to exposed and committed sin only. They do not seem to include secret sin,[17] and the specific allegiance to spirits and other sins the Bible so clearly defines.

Neo-Melanesian language[18] has drastically changed, and continues to do so. Therefore, such phrases are outdated. If they are used, they are considered old fashioned. *Senisim olpela pasin* or *kisim Jisas long laip*,[19] are better alternatives. *Senisim olpela pasin* is more inclined towards the process of conversion, while *kisim Jisas long laip* challenges someone to conversion. Are these not better terms than *tanim bel* or *tanim bel pinis*?

The second step is that consideration must be given to defining the process of change in the individual, or group of individuals, who are turning from one allegiance to another. The new allegiance must become the only source of their lives, with a resolve to live by the principles and precepts of the new allegiance, and not to resort again to the old ways.

Therefore, any effort to define the term, and its process, must be done well, using helpful, practical terms so that people from various levels of our society will understand them. This is vital, as many people lack a proper understanding of the cognitive process of conversion, and what it involves. It explains why nominalism is rampant.

---

[16] Frank Mihalic, *The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin* (Milton Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1971), 192. *Tanim bel* is "to influence, to change someone's mind, repent", and *tanim bel pinis* refers to "one already converted".

[17] Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", pp. 30-31.

[18] Sometimes referred to as "Pidgin English".

[19] *Senisim olpela pasin* means "to change your old way of living", and *kisim Jisas long laip* means "to accept Jesus into one's life".

This essay, therefore, makes an attempt to provide a Melanesian understanding of conversion and its process: it is the individual, or a group of individuals, who firstly *turn from* their primary allegiance. This may involve turning from the worship of spirits (ancestral and others), together with the accepted, negative Western or cultural influence and attitudes they have towards other people, themselves, and material things. Secondly, they turn to God by the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ, *place* their lives upon God for their livelihood, and *adopt* His principles and precepts, for practical *living under His leadership*. They also *do things God's way, daily*, and think *no more* of resorting to their former way of life.

This may not be the best definition. It is open to criticism, even to the extent of being rejected outright, or of it being redefined towards a better definition. However, if no attempt is made, nothing will ever be done to give an indigenous description of the concept and its process. It is, indeed, a challenge to Melanesian theologians to seriously think and redefine the process of conversion, and its meaning for our context.

The next section deals with the difference between individual and communal conversion.

Conversion Differences

The London Missionary Society (LMS), in 1795, adopted its fundamental principle "that our design is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any form of church government . . . but the glorious gospel of the blessed God to the heathens".[20] This was the motivating factor that drove them to commission missionaries to Africa, West Indies, India, and a year later, in 1796, to the Pacific Island of

---

[20] Andrew F. Walls, "Outposts of Empire", in *Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed. (Oxford UK: Lion Publishing, 1977), p. 550.

Tahiti, where "18 of their number remained",[21] with the objective to civilise and then Christianise.[22]

Those who remained were mostly artisans and labourers. They laboured and toiled for 16 years without any converts or church growth.[23] Some 36 years later, in PNG's Morobe District, the Neuendettelsau Mission was established, and later became the Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea. Wagner and Reiner note that the "first baptism took place in 1899, after 13 long years of missionary toil".[24] In the author's Kire area, it was reported that, in 1959, the Australian Churches of Christ's first missionaries moved to Pir from Tung:

> Pir proved to be an area where work was difficult, and often heartbreaking, and where response to the gospel was slow – after nine years of faithful ministry – there seemed very little sign of spiritual growth anywhere among the three villages that have received constant visiting. . . . In 1969, there were 26 baptisms.[25]

So, when we consider historical reports, such as these, the questions we may ask are: "Why were there no conversions seen in these places? What caused the delay for missionaries to see their first conversions, after so many years of toil? Were their evangelistic skills and missionary

---

[21] Allan R. Tippett, *People Movements in South Polynesia: A Study in Church Growth* (Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1971), p. 10.
[22] John Hitchen, "Training 'Tamate': Formation of the 19th-century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers of New Guinea", Ph.D. thesis (Aberdeen UK: University of Aberdeen, 1984), p. 775. Chalmers testifies to this in vivid terms with the challenge, "Nowhere have I seen our boasted civilisation civilising, but everywhere have I seen Christianity acting as the true civiliser . . . for God's sake let it be done at once! – gospel and commerce, but remember this, it must be the gospel first." See also Selwyn's perspective in David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesia Mission 1849-1942* (St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.
[23] Tippett, *People Movements in South Polynesia*, p. 11.
[24] *The Lutheran church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years 1886-1986*, Herwig Wagner, and Hermann Reiner, eds (Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986), pp. 41-53.
[25] "A Short History of Australian Churches of Christ New Guinea Mission", in Mission History Folder 2, Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library, nd.

endeavours ineffective? Were their conversion methods incapable of converting the indigenous islanders?"

The same concerns were raised by the many supporters of the early missionaries to Tahiti from England. They began to "wonder about this project, unto which they had put their funds for a decade and a half without any conversion returns".[26] Tippett explains that there were two reasons for this. The first was that lay people were sent, without any experienced missionaries being there to share, oversee, and advise. Their knowledge of the culture and environment came through the writings of seamen, and their only advice was from the Society's directors, and this was foreign. The second reason was that they did not have an indigenous agency to work with, and to later spearhead the gospel penetration.

The main factor that delayed conversion, then, was the "civilise to evangelise" policy, which gave civilisation priority over evangelisation. Certainly policies were made by a group of good-standing people, but, if souls are precious and are dying, would it not be possible to bend those policies to save them? Other factors also contributed to no conversions in Tahiti for 16 years, but it must also be noted that, unfortunately, the missionaries[27] found themselves in an environment of communal decision-making, and, to emphasise individual commitment or decision was something foreign to the islanders. So, conversions were slow.

The Western worldview of individual conversion has been the accepted norm in many Christian churches in Melanesia today, but it has its own strengths and weaknesses. One weakness is the imminent danger of the individual, who does not see the importance of being part of a family, or a community, and facing isolation from the group. Melanesian converts to Christianity must realise that they are not to be singled out of the community, but are to remain in the family, and the society. As Barclay states:

---

[26] Tippett, *People Movements in South Polynesia*, p. 11.
[27] Used generally to refer to missionaries from all missionary-sending organisations, such as Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Anglicans (including the LMS).

There is always a danger of making conversion an individualistic thing, in which a man is concerned with the saving of his own soul. It may well be said that conversion is the end of individualism, and the entry into fellowship . . . conversion is not only towards a certain kind of life; it is conversion into a fellowship.[28]

If an individual wants to destroy a family deity, consensus must be sought, otherwise it is not possible. The decision to dispose of the deity must come, firstly, from the group.

In Melanesia, communal conversion has not escaped negative comments. Some anthropologists, missionary historians, and theoreticians have often attached negative descriptions of mass movements they have observed as a "fearful, hysterical crowd, acting as an irrational mass".[29] One thing that these experts did not perhaps realise is that Melanesians are spiritual people. They did not appreciate that Melanesians have a genuine desire within to experience something completely satisfying, and that it is not "cargo", as is often referred to. St Augustine of Hippo said long ago that there is a vacuum in man that only God can fill. The desire to have this vacuum filled is perhaps their longing, and their search.

Communal conversion in Melanesia must be seen in the light of Tippett's terminology: "People movements or people's movements".[30] Or, as Whiteman puts it, a "multi-individual response . . . that is, individuals established the new norm for the group, which then led to

---

[28] Barclay, *Turning To God*, p. 71.

[29] Tippett, *People Movements in South Polynesia*, p. 199.

[30] Ibid. Tippett further specifies the phenomena of people *movements* and *people's movements*, as the former suggesting the multi-individual character, and the latter the structural entity. The former is valuable for describing the conversion of a village or family; the latter for differentiating between, say, the Tongan and the Maori movements. See also Donald Anderson McGavran, *Church Growth and Christian Mission: A Pioneering Reappraisal of the Role of Christian Missions and the Prospects of the Church Around the World Today* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965), pp.69-86.

whole groups choosing to become Christian . . . where individuals could practise their understanding of Christian living, as a corporate entity".[31]

Within a Melanesian society, although a multi-individual response is usually the norm, the commitment each individual makes within the communal decision is a very crucial commitment. Therefore, it must be intact, and consistently maintained within the group. Without such a balanced emphasis, it is very easy for people, who were part of the decision-making, to slide into nominalism, and become mechanical, giving verbal support only, but unwilling to actively participate in community life and responsibilities. So, as discussed, whichever way conversion is experienced, the goal is for better living within a communal society, both for now and the future. It is a steady ongoing walk with Christ. It is just as important as the moment of becoming a Christian.

The act of conversion is vital, whether done individually or corporately. If conversion is a process, as has been seen earlier, then what are the stages? Are these important to know? The next point of our discussion will help us to look at the different stages of this process.

Conversion Stages

Communal conversion, or multi-individual movements, was not new, or limited only to the Pacific Islands peoples. Acts 19 tells how a number of those who practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. That was a multi-individual movement.

Tippett sees the Christian experience of conversion and commitment as going through four periods or stages: from **Awareness,** through **Decision-Making,** through **Incorporation,** and on to **Maturity**.

---

[31] Darrell Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1983), p. 186.

Old Way ➡ New Way

Each stage is directed by an experiential point.[32] Hovey further develops this process by adding what Kraft saw as the specific decisions that are involved in each stage. The process, he states, is only complete when the person physically enters into heaven.[33] Hanciles notes seven stages, and gives a very lengthy deliberation on each one.[34]

The different stages of conversion and commitment presented are very helpful to the intellectual mind. However, many Melanesians would not understand them. Melanesian theologians are, therefore, urged to see the importance of conversion, and to interpret and contextualise it for our people. Hosea, in the Old Testament, correctly said, "my people are destroyed because of lack of knowledge".[35] This lack of explanation has left so many members of churches in Melanesia, as well as in the Pacific, largely nominal.

So far, we have considered the different stages of conversion. The challenge now is to explain them clearly, so that the people can understand the process, and the commitment one makes. The attributes that contribute to conversion in Melanesia are discussed next. What are the dynamic factors that lead to mass and individual conversions in the Pacific?

DYNAMICS OF COMMUNAL CONVERSION

The missionaries of the early 19th century engaged in mission work at various locations, and identified different motivations for conversion. Whiteman identifies six dynamics of conversion in the Solomon Islands. They are the desire for education, which the indigenous people see as the passport to the Western world; the desire for material objects of European origin; the desire for peace; a connection to the outside world; the desire to adopt Christianity, because it is perceived to be a religion of

---

[32] Tippett, *The Deep Sea Canoe*, pp. 42-43.
[33] Hovey, *Before All Else Fails*, p. 86.
[34] Hanciles, "Conversion and Social Change", p. 160.
[35] Hos 4:6.

great practical use in the contact with foreigners; and, finally, because they were attracted to the influential individual personality of the missionaries.[36]

Beside those identified dynamics, Daimoi notes another reason that Melanesians "fearfully and positively"[37] embraced missionaries. It was not because of the ultimate desire for Christianity, but because they believed these missionaries were the expected dead relatives that had come from the land of the dead. The other noted motivating factors of conversion are what some have termed "power" and "cargo".[38] From these discerned motivations arose comments such as "often mass conversions resulted because they [Melanesians] expected the Christians' God to give them the white man's riches and abilities, in the same way as their former gods".[39] This comment, however, does not fairly represent every Melanesian society.

The main dynamic of conversion, as I see it, is through a demonstration of spiritual power. People began to see the powerlessness of their gods, as they were confronted by the God of the missionaries. King Pomare II of Tahiti,[40] and Varani of Fiji,[41] are examples of this. When King Pomare II, in 1809, was defeated by his political rivals, and the missionaries left, he was open for change. But it was not until a child died within the chiefly ranks that he openly made known his intention to the chiefly council to turn from his gods to the God of the missionaries. This was the normal Oceanic pattern of making decisions.

---

[36] Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries*, p. 188.

[37] Joshua Daimoi, "Nominalism in Papua New Guinea" Th.M. thesis, Pasadena CA: Fuller Theological Seminary (Ann Arbour MI: University Microfilms International, 1987), p. 32.

[38] Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", pp. 31-32. "Cargo" means the mythological anticipation of "goods" (more inclined towards the Western-type) coupled with an abundant life.

[39] Dorothy Tweddell, "Cargo Cults: a Search for Meaning", in vertical file, CLTC Banz Library, 1977), p. 15.

[40] Tippett, *People Movements in South Polynesia*, p. 16.

[41] Tippett, *The Deep Sea Canoe*, pp. 47-48.

The other dynamic factor was the influence of the leaders or chiefs of the people groups. On Lifou Island, in New Caledonia, the blind chief Bula, who was befriended by MacFarlane, had all those, who aligned themselves to him, embrace the Protestant LMS mission there. The opposite of this was the chief Ukenizo, who resisted the LMS mission, because of his rival, Bula, and embraced the Marists.

The strength of such an influential decision was that the people were likely to maintain peace, so long as their leader remained peaceful with others, and did what was needed for the mission. This strength can also bring an adverse effect on the community, much like George Taufa'ahau I, the King of Tonga, in 1885. Mr Baker, who was his adviser, convinced some Bible school students to give them support to unite the Free church and demolish the Wesleyan church.[42] The weakness to note, for conversion under leadership influence, is that when the leader fails to continue, and withdraws, it is unlikely that the followers will remain steady in their commitment.

Another forceful stimulus to conversion is the fear of hell, as Weymouth observed among the Gogodala people.[43] When the Australian Churches of Christ New Guinea Mission first went to the Pir, Temnung, and Minung areas in 1959, my uncle was the first indigenous evangelist of that mission. I can still remember him preaching about hell in our village. Because of the fear of hell, the whole village turned up the next day just to get baptised, in order to escape hell. The danger here is that decisions were made out of fear, and only time would tell if their commitment was authentic.

---

[42] Allan K Davidson, Semisi Na, ed., *The Story of My life: A Tongan Missionary to Ontong Java* (Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies of University of South Pacific, 1996), p. 83.
[43] Weymouth, "The Gogodala Society in Papua", p. 170.

Another dynamic factor is the *wantok* system, which contributes to conversion. Unlike other Pacific islanders, the *wantok* system is a very strong system among Melanesians, and was a very dynamic factor in conversion. Through this system, people are able to propagate the gospel, but it can also have adverse effects on ministry.

The dynamics of conversion, listed above, are not exhaustive. They highlight only some of the motives for being converted. If these dynamics continue to surface, there is a danger that the reverse of what people claim this nation to be, a Christian country, will occur, as Kero has indicated.[44] Mass conversion has its limitations and weaknesses. Unless these are corrected, they can contribute to mass nominalism, as Daimoi, Kero, and Kendi have pointed out.[45]

THE MEANING OF CONVERSION TO PNG CHURCHES

In 1796, the first LMS missionaries landed in Tahiti and commenced work there, though without much success for 16 years, in terms of converts. In 1871, 75 years later, the LMS missionaries reached the largest island in the world, Papua New Guinea (PNG), then known as New Guinea.[46] Mission history tells us that, in PNG, the LMS entered southern Papua, and began their work in 1871. The Methodists arrived on the Duke of York Island in East New Britain in 1875. The Roman Catholics had landed earlier, on the Bismarck Archipelago, in 1847, but, unfortunately, their work did not progress. They later came to the southern part of the country in 1875. In 1876, the Neuendettelsau Mission began in Finschhafen along the north coast of New Guinea. In 1891, the Anglicans landed at Dogura, and commenced their work there. These are the major denominations that formed what we call the mainline churches today.

---

[44] See Kero, "Nominalism", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1998), p. 57.

[45] Daimoi, "Nominalism in Papua New Guinea", pp. 1ff. See also Wayne Kendi, "The Doctrine of Justification: The Remedy To the Ills of The Melanesian Church", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 21-2 (2005), p. 82; and Kewai Kero, "Nominalism", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1998), p. 57.

[46] Throughout, I have mostly used Papua New Guinea (PNG), rather than New Guinea, to avoid ignoring areas like the New Guinea Islands and along the Papuan coast.

Each of these denominations had their own mission goals and objectives to fulfil, including the concern for the conversion of souls. Like their previous counterparts in the Pacific, these mission organisations unknowingly entered Melanesian societies of communal decision-making, which had a cosmological worldview that was entirely different to that in the West.

During the early stages of mission establishments, several misunderstandings of conversion were evident, because of, as Horndasch notes, the already existing common belief "in the coming of the Ultimate Future. The notion of the golden age has been present in their traditional myths, and has emerged from time to time in various religious activities."[47] Stilwell adds, "this meant a drive for abundant life . . . and to go on experiencing this life".[48] "Cargo cults, for instance, are a reflection of the common myth, present in the traditional religious beliefs, that anticipated a radical revolution in the future to fulfil the hopes of humankind."[49]

The reason for these misconceptions was probably because of some of the terminology used by the missionaries. In addition, the Bible contains words, similar to terms the indigenous people commonly held, like salvation, life after death, power, and the future. Whenever there was a revival or revitalisation movement, people often saw this as a means, by which the ancestors would usher in the expected cargo. To avoid this thinking, it is vital to explain what revival entails. True revival movements bring a hunger for God, and His Word, prayer, and a renewed zeal for evangelism.

Conversion, for the indigenous people, had connotations of education, the desire for power (*mana*), cargo, and so forth, with their fellow Solomon Islanders. Weymouth has perceived the Gogodalas' motivation for becoming Christians in this way, "Christianity was associated, in the minds of the Gogodalas, with social improvement and material

---

[47] Helmut Horndasch, "Theology and Christian Spirituality in the Melanesian Context", in *Catalyst* 28-2 (1998), p. 122.
[48] Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", p. 31.
[49] Horndasch, "Theology and Christian Spirituality in the Melanesian Context", p. 31.

advantage, and that this played a significant part in the early movement to Christianity, is beyond doubt."[50] Yet, within the church, it meant a personal commitment to become a member of a particular mission. Loyalty and allegiance were now on a denominational basis, rather than on the existing communal life in each setting. Kadiba deliberates, "in religious experience and religious symbols, Melanesian Christians have been alienated from their traditional ways. Hence there is a foreignness about their Christianity."[51]

Negatively, such gatherings of people – without due consideration of their allegiance to their social groups – have led to many separate groups today. What has this produced, but divisions? Who are we to blame, but ourselves, for what we have done? What implications does conversion have on a Melanesian convert? What theological issues confront him/her today? The next section helps us to see this.

REVIEW AND CRITIQUE ON "TOWARDS A MELANESIAN THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION" STUDY

REVIEW AND COMMENTS

Ewan Stilwell was once a lecturer at the Christian Leaders' Training College's Banz and Port Moresby campuses. With his five years' experience as a missionary in PNG, he was able to point to the direction in which indigenous conversion should go. In his study, he gives four basic parts of conversion. They are a radical turning which involves, firstly, a turning from [Repent]; secondly, a turning to [Believe]; thirdly, a turning into [Be baptised]; and finally, a turning for [Service]. We now look at each of these radical turns briefly.

First is the turning from sin, which is repentance. In this section, Stilwell gives a good scriptural basis, as well as defining sin. However, there are two terms he uses in this section that need some clarification.

---

[50] Weymouth, "The Gogodala Society in Papua", p. 169.
[51] John Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology", in *The Gospel is Not Western*, Garry Trompf, ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1978), np.

The first is the term "cargo". There is no question about the idea of cargo in cult movements. However, to just generalise that all Melanesians align themselves to cargo is not a fair comment that represents every cultural and language group. Within the Kire culture of Madang, there seems to be no myths of any sort that indicate this, and no stories were told of people, who expected cargo to arrive. This may be because the idea has either been submerged, or has been done away with by leaders of the villages of Kire, which embraced Christianity.

The other term to clarify is the closely-related term "abundant life" (*gutpela sindaun)*. To merely see this from an anthropological perspective would lead one to arrive at negative assumptions. The opposite would be true, if seen from a theological perspective, as Stilwell correctly states: "Conversion . . . brings the promise of a real fulfilment of this deep Melanesian yearning for abundant life."[52]

For a converted Melanesian, life and worship are not segregated from the secular and sacred, as they are in the West. Also, to a Melanesian, this abundant life is not only one that is expected to be received, when one dies, or the Lord returns, but one that can be fully enjoyed here and now, within the communal life of people, where it is expressed in praise, worship, and sharing of the blessings received. In John 10:10b, Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." This life can be fully shared within a church, village, clan, or family. Boseto aptly said, "It is a life inseparable *from* community, *with* community, and *for* community."[53] Therefore, the expression of this life's joy is well represented in the worship, communal, and church gatherings.

The second turning, Stilwell describes, to believe is related to a power encounter. In relation to the access of this power, the desire sometimes can mislead people to seek power from God, in much the same way as they did in their past life. Prayer, itself, can be seen as a ritual for acquiring power for selfish use, rather than as a means of communication

---

[52] Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", p. 32.
[53] Leslie Boseto, "The Gift of Community", in *International Review of Mission* 72-288 (1983), pp. 581-583.

with God. Otherwise, I agree with Stilwell on this point, in every respect.

The third is a turning to become the people of God. This point is also significant, as Melanesians are communal people. Identity and personal significance come from family, clan, and the village. There is also another important aspect of personal significance and identity, where the person takes on the family, the clan, and the village name wherever he goes. What that person does as he relates to other people also reflects the family, the clan, and the village. So, being integrated into the people of God carries this important principle. Who we are in public, and what we say and do, represents God and His people. Sad to say, not many of those, who claim to be God's people, reflect God's actions among others.

Finally, Stilwell looks at turning for mission in the world: service. He puts it well, when he states that mission is related closely with the idea of service, and that any form of service, whatever it may be, must be done in a servant style. Unfortunately, for most Melanesians, misconceptions have led people to think that a missionary is the one who goes out to another country, rather than seeing that every Christian is a missional Christian. Therefore, many do not often see themselves as missionaries where they are.

Conversion is fundamentally a process of worldview change in an individual that ripples through group life, as seen in this study. It is a change from a focus on ancestral and geographical spirits to a focus on God, and involves the portrayal, by life and deed, in the community of this changed allegiance. As this is lived, questions come to mind about the implications of the converted life, and how one can deal with them for better living. The next section deals with this issue.

RELEVANT THEOLOGICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING CONVERSION IN MELANESIA TODAY

As people see multi-individuals make a response to the gospel, one might ask, "Are all these people saved?" Salvation is by grace alone, and it is the gift of God. Salvation is granted to those who personally make a commitment to God, within a group context, as seen in Acts 16:31. There is danger in assuming that, because people within a group are automatically registered by a church, they are saved, when the group, as a whole, responds to the gospel message. This must be avoided, and

There is also a question of whether or not the Spirit leaves the convert. Unlike traditional religions, where the spirits come and go, through a "shaman",[54] God the Holy Spirit is omnipresent. The moment a person aligns his life to Christ, the Holy Spirit enters, and resides with and in that person at that very time. In OT times, the Holy Spirit came and went, but now He resides with those who have aligned their lives with Christ.

Another implication of conversion upon a person, within a communal life, is the aspect of discipleship. When one is converted, he/she lives a life that is connected to Christ, as John 15 tells us. In this life, we represent God's community, Christ Jesus' clan, and belong to their group. It is a life of discipline, in a similar way as traditional initiation rites enable one to be integrated into the village as a mature person. Therefore, as God instructed Abram to walk before Him, and be blameless,[55] so must we.

Conversion of a Melanesian means also that the style of leadership changes. Whether achieved or ascribed, it must be changed to take on the servant-style leadership, expressed in the Bible,[56] and demonstrated by Jesus.[57] Pedi Anis and Ezekiel Waisale explore this form of

---

[54] See Raeburn Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in 19th-century Pacific Island's Christianity* (Canberra ACT: Pandanus Books, 2005), p.25.
[55] Gen 17:1; 1 Pet 1:16.
[56] Matt 20:25-28.
[57] John 13:1-17.

leadership and decision-making in government.[58]   The attitude towards others, as we lead them, must reflect who we are, and to whom we have aligned our lives.   Continued submission to ancestral spirits,[59] and to other spirits, is another area, from which we need to be truly turned away. People once used rituals to manipulate the spirits for good or bad. The power that was once sought from these deceptive spirits must now be stopped. God must be given the priority. The fear of deceptive spirits must also be successfully dealt with.[60]

Conversion also requires that God must be given priority over clan or family allegiance.   Though these allegiances are vital in our society, as part and parcel of our relationships, when decisions of loyalty to family or clan undermine the loyalty to God, loyalty to God must be given the priority.

The relationship between conversion and prosperity theology[61] is another matter that must be addressed.   This bad theology has somehow got people giving to the work of God, above and beyond their limitations. It has caused unnecessary high expectations that God will bless them if they give abundantly. Christian converts, in present-day Melanesia, have no stable church base on which to rest. One cannot blame others for the dislocation of youth, and many others.   Equally so, it is of our own making, as Kenilorea states.[62] Such motivations are dangerous.

Even the interrelationship between conversion and fellowship is inseparable.   Within a communal context, fellowship always gives the

---

[58] See Pedi Anis and Ezekiel Waisale, "The Bible in Decision-Making", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), pp. 16-23 for a full description of what it means to be leaders, and making important decisions.

[59] K. Burridge, "Tangu, Northern Madang District", in *Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australia, New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, P. Lawrence, and M. J. Meggitt, eds (Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 224ff. Burridge explains there are no strong ties to ancestors, except an immediately-dead member of the clan or family.

[60] Stilwell, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", p. 32.

[61] Hanciles, "Conversion and Social Change", p. 172.

[62] Peter Kenilorea, "Cultural Values versus the Acquisitiveness of Man: A View from the Solomon Islands", in *Pacific Perspective* 5-2 (1976), p. 3.

sense of identity and influence. Deeper commitment and loyalty are found to be very strong within this family unit of belonging.[63] Development of this kind of environment provides opportunities for discipleship training, ministry together, receiving answers to pressing unanswered questions that are not given on Sunday mornings,[64] and to further help younger ones grow.

The implication of conversion on stewardship is another issue. A turning to God means that our resources, our money, our time, and our family are "baptised", and seen as the means to support the work of God, and to be used for His glory. Therefore, natural resources must be strictly protected against unnecessary exploitation.

Finally, conversion must affect the relationship one has with the Living Word. Jesus said that without Him we cannot do anything.[65] Boseto also sees the need for the Word to be concretely seen in Melanesia, and he challenges fellow Islanders to live the Word – "to 'incarnate' [make human] the word as we struggle together, share together, and care for one another. He is one of those who no longer looks for a conceptualised Word, but the incarnate Word in each place here and now."[66]

THE WAY AHEAD

"How deep-rooted is the Christian faith in this so-called Christian nation, which is also seeking to establish her own identity?"[67] Pre-independent church and national leaders have played an important role in the formation of our government. Our National Constitution reflects this involvement.[68] "The national leaders adopted our National Constitution,

---

[63] Leslie Boseto, "Mission and Development", in *Point* 1 (1978), p. 32.

[64] Paulias Matane, "Our Guiding Star", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), p. 15.

[65] John 15:5.

[66] Leslie Boseto, "The Incarnate Word", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), p. 78.

[67] John Guise "How Deep-Rooted Is the Christian Faith in Our Nation?", in *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, Cliff Wright, and Leslie Fugui, eds (Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1985), p. 12.

[68] *The Constitution Of The Independent State Of Papua New Guinea*, Port Moresby PNG: Legislative Council, 1975, p. 1.

which is one of the best in the world, truly."[69] The foundation was set, but, over the last 30-plus years since 1975, so much has changed, in terms of our national identity. We had no choice but to move towards globalisation in our political, economic, social, and even spiritual endeavours. So, where are we now? Do we have our own Christian identity, based on "valued traditions and ceremonies, involved with the whole of human life"?[70] Leana asks along the same lines, "What should the Melanesian church of the future be like?"[71] This and many other similar questions cannot be answered fully by other people. Church leaders and theologians in this nation, alike, must work together with a combined effort to develop that ideal Christian identity, desired by the late Sir John Guise. Leana's article is a step in the right direction, but how long this will take will depend entirely on our efforts.

Some positive signs are present today of what the future church of PNG will be like. The first is that churches have now moved towards working together. In Lae, this is done mainly through the Ministers' Fraternal. The second is that walls of denominational boundaries are now collapsing, due to revival and renewal experiences, and people have the freedom to engage in fellowship with others. If these current ministry forms continue, Christian members of different denominations will embrace each other, as one community of believers in this nation. Communal identity will still be maintained, and denominational tags done away with. We will also begin to see the rise of a national and missional church, which will be one, catholic, and apostolic.

CONCLUSION

This essay has emphasised that conversion, in a Melanesian context, is fundamentally a turning-about process from primal religions toward God. Whether conversion occurs individually or corporately, the difference is not really the concern. Decisions must be made towards the one goal of living together within a communal village, or city, as God's

---

[69] Matane, "Our Guiding Star", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), p. 14.
[70] John Guise, "How Deep-Rooted Is the Christian Faith in Our Nation?", p. 12.
[71] Amos Leana, "What Should the Melanesian Church of the Future be Like?", in Melanesian Journal of Theology 19-1 (2003), p. 102.

people. This is the church redefined. This is where the real-life questions and queries dwell. This is where the incarnated Word can become a reality, and it will not be pretended in the weekly activities environment. At the same time, we must firmly maintain the one church, and many congregations, meeting, as is done currently in most of our cities.

The way forward to a better communal way of living is to work together now to involve converts in each community, through discipleship training and nurture, in growing towards becoming a national, but indigenous, missional church – a church which is one, catholic, and apostolic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barclay, William, *Turning To God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1964.

Bloom, Benjamin, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, London UK: Longman, 1964.

Bock, Darrell L., "Conversion", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996.

Brown, Denis E., "Worldview and Worldview Change: A Reader", Master's project in Missiology, School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena CA, 1983.

Burridge, K., "Tangu, Northern Madang District", in *Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australia, New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, P. Lawrence, and M. J. Meggitt, eds, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1965.

The Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby PNG: Legislative Council, 1975.

Daimoi, Joshua K., "Nominalism in Papua New Guinea", Th.M. thesis, Pasadena CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, Ann Arbor MI: University Microfilms International, 1987.

Davidson, Allan K., "The Pacific Is No Longer a Mission Field?", in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the 20th Century*, Donald M. Lewis, ed., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

———, ed., *Semisi Na: The Story of My life: A Tongan Missionary to Ontong Java*. Suva Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies of University of South Pacific, 1996.

Green, Hollis L., *Why Churches Die*, Minneapolis MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1972.

Guise, John, "How Deep-Rooted is The Christian Faith in Our Nation?", in *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, Cliff Wright, and Leslie Fugui, eds, Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1986.

Hanciles, Jehu J., "Conversion and Social Change", in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the 20th Century*, Donald M. Lewis, ed., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

Hilliard, David, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesia Mission 1849-1942*, St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1978.

Hitchen, John, "Training 'Tamate': Formation of the 19th-century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers of New Guinea", Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen UK: University of Aberdeen, 1984.

Hovey, Kevin, *Before All Else Fails . . . Read the Instructions*, Brisbane Qld: Harvest Publications, 1986.

Kadiba, John, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology" in *The Gospel is Not Western*, Garry Trompf, ed., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1978.

Lange, Raeburn, *Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in 19th-century Pacific Island's Christianity*, Canberra ACT: Pandanus Books, 2005.

McGavran, Donald Anderson, *Church Growth and Christian Mission: A Pioneering Reappraisal of the Role of Christian Missions and the Prospects of the Church Around the World Today*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965.

———, ed., *Homogeneous Populations and Church Growth*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965.

Mihalic, Frank, *The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin*, Milton Qld: Jacaranda Press, 1971.

Narokobi, Bernard, "Concept of Ownership in Melanesia", Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute No 6, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1988, pp. 1-32.

———, *The Melanesian Way*, 2nd edn, Boroko PNG: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1983.

Pickett, Waskom J., *The Dynamics of Church Growth*, New York NY: Abingdon Press, 1963.

Price, David, "The Protestant Understanding of Conversion and its Implications for Missionary Obedience", D.Miss. thesis, Pasadena CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979.

Recker, Robert, "What are People Movements?", in *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, Harvie M. Conn, ed., Nutley NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977.

Rowe, George Stringer, *The Life of John Hunt: Missionary to the Cannibals*, London UK: Charles Kelly, 1859.

Tippett, Allan R., *People Movements in South Polynesia: A Study in Church Growth*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1971.

———, *The Deep Sea Canoe: The Story of the Third-World Missionaries in the South Pacific*, South Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1977.

Wagner, Herwig, and Reiner, Hermann, eds, *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years 1886-1986*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986.

Walls, Andrew F., "Outpost of Empire", in *Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed., Oxford UK: Lion Publishing, 1977.

Weymouth, Ross M., "The Gogodala Society in Papua and the Unevangelized Fields Mission 1890-1977", Ph.D. thesis, Adelaide SA: Flinders University, 1978.

Whiteman, Darrell L., *Melanesians and Missionaries*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1983.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Anis, Pedi, and Waisale, Ezekiel, "The Bible in Decision-Making", in *Catalyst* 28-4 (1988), pp. 16-23.

Bayston, B. D., "Christianity, Pornography and Censorship", in *Interchange* 3-1 (June 1971), pp. 15-28.

Boseto, Leslie, "The Incarnate Word", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), pp. 76-78.

———, "Mission and Development", in *Point* 1 (1978), pp. 27-36.

———, "The Gift of Community", in *International Review of Mission* 72-288 (1983), pp. 581-583.

Horndasch, Helmut, "Theology and Christian Spirituality in the Melanesian Context", in *Catalyst* 28-2 (1998), pp. 117-124.

Ingebritson, Joel, "The Challenge of Sects to the Mainline Churches in PNG: A Pastoral Response", in *Catalyst* 19-1 (1989), pp. 67-78.

Kendi, Wayne, "The Doctrine of Justification: The Remedy to the Ills of The Melanesian Church", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 21-2 (2005), pp. 71-99.

Kenilorea, Peter, "Cultural Values versus the Acquisitiveness of Man: A view from the Solomon Islands", in *Pacific Perspective* 5-2 (1976), pp. 3-8.

Kero, Kewai R., "Nominalism", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14-1 (1998), pp. 57-86.

Leana, Amos, "What Should the Melanesian Church of the Future be Like?", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 19-1 (2003), p. 102.

Matane, Paulias, "Our Guiding Star", in *Catalyst* 18-4 (1988), pp. 12-15.

Snyders, John, "The Best of Two Worlds", in *Catalyst* 1-2, (June, 1971), pp. 47-60.

Somare, Michael, "New Goals for New Guinea", in *Pacific Perspective: Journal of the South Pacific Social Sciences Association* 2-1 (1973), pp. 1-6.

Stilwell, Ewan, "Towards a Melanesian Theology of Conversion", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-1 (1993), pp. 29-42.

VERTICAL FILE, CLTC LIBRARY BANZ PNG

"A Short History of Australian Churches of Christ New Guinea Mission", in Mission History Folder 2, Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library, nd.

Stilwell, Ewan, "A Study of the Relationships between Cargo and Revival Movements", nd.

Tweddell, Dorothy, "Cargo Cults: A Search for Meaning", 1977.