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Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools

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SPEAK OF THE DEVIL: *SUANGGI*, SATAN, AND SPIRITUAL HEALING IN WEST PAPUA*

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Abstract

Indonesian occupation in West Papua over the last six decades has catalysed endemic inter-generational trauma, and a recent report from the region relates accounts of spiritual attack, possession, and spiritual healing. While the West Papuan culture is rich in accounts of spiritual activity by local spirits, or *suanggi*, the secularising influence of modernity has left the church with little to say or do in response to such spiritual attacks. This article seeks to remedy this by engaging theologically with the West Papuan spiritual reality of spirits, *suanggi*, and spiritual healing. This paper begins by outlining the problem that the form of Christianity brought to West Papua by western missionaries has no mechanism for addressing the phenomena of *suanggi*. The proposed solution is to search for authentic ways to engage theologically with the experiences of West Papuans and *suanggi*. A way forward will be demonstrated by reflecting theologically on one case of spiritual attack and subsequent healing.

Key Words

West Papua, Melanesia, exorcism, spiritual healing, developing world, trauma, political theology

A devout Christian West Papuan woman was going about her day when she felt an unexpected pain. By the end of the day, she could not move and was forced to bedrest. Her father was a Christian pastor, and the whole community joined in prayer for her. When she did not show signs of improvement, they called for a *dukun*, a traditional healer, who was also an East Timorese Roman Catholic priest living in West Papua. The *dukun* arrived and divined that the source of illness was outside the house. The family discovered bones buried just outside the front door. When the bones were removed, the woman immediately recovered. The family speculates that a black magic curse using harmful spirits known as *suanggi* had been

* Special acknowledgement goes to the West Papuan members of the reference group for this research project: Jacob Rumbiak, Babuan Mirino, Natalie Adadikam, Ian Okoka, Sandhy Sampari, and Amos Wainggai. Additionally, thanks go to John Bottomley, Louise Byrne, Nadine Rutter, and Peter Woods for their contributions.

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intended for the woman's husband due to a business disagreement, but because she had been the first person to walk out the door the curse had landed on her.

INTRODUCTION

The woman in this story is the sister of a West Papuan refugee in Australia, who shared with me this account of his firsthand experience with *suanggi* and *dukun*. Similar stories abound in West Papua and across Melanesia. While it is easy from a western perspective to dismiss these stories as fables, folk legends, or "primitive" explanations of illness or misfortune, this research project challenges those *a priori* assumptions and engages through theological reflection with a culture steeped in spirits.

The history of West Papua is complex and contested. The Dutch formally colonised West Papua at the end of the nineteenth century. When the Dutch left the region at the start of the 1960s, Indonesia's military swept in, and has occupied the land ever since. Indigenous West Papuans identify as Melanesian, not as Indonesian, and have been struggling for independence and self-determination ever since. West Papuans are at a critical point in their struggle for independence from Indonesia, which has been found to be in gross violations of human rights and injustice. Despite promises of self-determination and political representation by the Indonesian government,[1] reports from external human rights groups,[2] academic researchers,[3] as well as the World Council of Churches[4] have documented torture, extra-judicial killings, and other traumas inflicted upon the indigenous peoples. At Ipenburg describes the Indonesian oppression as systematic

[1] Of significant note is the 2001 law on "special autonomy" for West Papua, drafted by indigenous Papuans and ratified by the Indonesian government. However, the implementation of the law has been globally recognised as ineffective in fulfilling the promises made by Indonesia.

[2] Human Rights Watch, "Out of Sight: Endemic Abuse and Impunity in Papua's Central Highlands," *Human Rights Watch* 19/10 (2007): 1–81.

[3] Susan J. Rees and Derek Silove, "Speaking Out about Human Rights and Health in West Papua," *Lancet* 370, no. 9588 (2007): 637–639. See also Susan J. Rees, R. van de Pas, D. Silove, and M. Kareth, "Health and Human Security in West Papua," *Medical Journal of Australia* 189 no. 11/12, (2008): 641-643.

[4] World Council of Churches Executive Committee Statement (22–28 May, 2019, Bossey Switzerland), *Concern and Solidarity for West Papua* (www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-wccc-executive-committee-statement-concern-and-solidarity-for-west-papua).

dehumanisation.[5] Even as the struggle for self-determination and liberation continues, the material fabric of Christian commitments to justice, peace, and love of neighbour are a source of contention among West Papuan churches.[6]

A second and related factor that fuels the exigency of this conversation is the widespread trauma throughout the country. Inter-generational trauma is endemic not only in those residing in West Papua[7] but also in West Papuans who have emmigrated to other countries.[8] There are limited resources available to address this trauma, which can have lasting mental, spiritual, and physical symptoms affecting subsequent generations.[9] Prominent West Papuan activist, pastor, and theologian Rev Dr Benny Giay founded a theological school "specifically dedicated to train local pastors how to deal with the past trauma, because in 1980s up until the year 2000, the area was declared a military operation zone. There's a lot of trauma, where people lost many lives."[10] Unfortunately, little has changed in the six decades of Indonesian military occupation in regards to the trauma inflicted upon West Papuans. As the West Papuan people continue to be traumatised by this occupation, a report emerged from an Australian man praying for spiritual healing as a means to address spiritual trauma. During this process, the healer came to believe that West Papuans were being afflicted not only through political and spiritual trauma but also by dark spiritual powers. Five audio

[5] At Ipenburg, "Regaining Humanness: The Papuan Struggle for Human Rights," paper presented to the International Association for Mission Studies, XIIth Quadrennial International Conference, Balatonfüred, Hungary, 2008.

[6] For a more thorough account of the complexities of the inter and intra-church tension on the role of Christianity in the struggle for self-determination, see chapter three of Marcus Campbell, "Religion and Resistance in West Papua: The Role of Christianity in the Struggle for peace and justice," (MA diss., Sydney, 2017).

[7] Rees, "Speaking Out About Human Rights and Health in West Papua", 637.

[8] Susan J. Rees and Derek Silove, "Sakit Hati: A State of Chronic Mental Distress Related to Resentment and Anger amongst West Papuan Refugees Exposed to Persecution," *Social Science & Medicine* 73 (2007): 103–110.

[9] Joseph Westermeyer, M. Bouafuely, J. Neider, and A. Callies, "Somatization among Refugees: An Epidemiologie Study," *Psychosomatics* 30 (1989): 34–43.

[10] Tanenbaum Center For Interreligious Understanding, "Toward a Zone of Peace: The Rev Dr Benny Giay, West Papua, Indonesia," in *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (ed. David Little; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 402–428, at 418.

recordings summarising accounts of spiritual healing were given to the Federal Republic of West Papua (FRWP) by the spiritual healer.[11]

These accounts of spirit attacks and spiritual healing in West Papua from 2018 provided by the FRWP merit 1) a theological analysis aimed at thickening of Christian understanding of spirituality by looking at the world through a West Papuan cultural lens, and 2) an exploration of modes and models within Christian literature to address this spiritual activity. The goal of this paper, a first step in the research project, is to thicken our understanding of spirituality and incarnational theology in light of the spiritual healings reported in West Papua.

First, we will examine the problem of the "excluded middle," a concept noted by missiologist Paul Hiebert in 1982. The problem he expounds upon is the lack of answers that modern western Christianity has in addressing real world problems arising from "spirits of this world, to local ancestors and ghosts, or to the souls of animals."[12] This problem arises from a coupling of theology to a dualistic modern worldview.

The proposed solution to this problem is a serious engagement with spiritual phenomena, such as *suanggi*, possession, exorcism, spiritual attack, and spiritual healing, in West Papuan cultural terms. *Suanggi*, an Indonesian word for spirit will be used throughout this paper as it is the word used by the spiritual healer and the West Papuan reference team.[13] We cannot, of

[11] These case studies were recorded after the Australian man had returned to Australia from a recent trip to West Papua. After consultation with FRWP on a way to address what he identified as spiritual attacks, he recorded his reflections on these cases and gave them to FRWP. The FRWP subsequently commissioned the Centre for Research in Religion and Social Policy, part of the University of Divinity, Melbourne, to analyse these accounts. This paper is not the analysis of those accounts, but uses those accounts as a starting place to begin a larger discussion of the possibilities and challenges of integrating cultural realities of spirits into Christian theology. A biographical note: I, the writer of this paper, am not West Papuan, and was raised and trained in western theological methods. I am indebted to the West Papuans and others on the reference team with extensive experience and knowledge of West Papua for their insights, comments, and stories that shape this project.

[12] Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (1982): 35–47, at 43.

[13] A note on the word *suanggi*: there are 254 tribal languages spoken in West Papua, and while each uses a different word to describe the spirits, there is a common understanding that this Malay-Indonesian word here used refers to the same phenomena. (An alternate spelling used by Indonesians in other parts is *suwanggi* but the West Papuans use *suanggi*.) *Suanggi* can refer to good or bad spirits akin to angels or demons as well as to the spirits that inhabit natural organic or inorganic objects. *Suanggi* can also refer to the practice of using black magic to

course, simply undo the secularising work of modernity that made taboo all talk of local spiritual events from Christian discourse and Christian churches; however, we can challenge those taboos by acknowledging the spiritual realities in West Papua. This clears the way for movement towards a holistic theology that empowers discourse around *suanggi* and spirits through biblical and theological reflection. We will then use the tools we develop to analyse one of the case studies recorded by the spiritual healer as an example of a way forward.

This paper is a first step in uncovering an under-analysed dimension of spirituality. Numerous interdisciplinary questions of the anthropological, sociological, psychological, and political implications arise that we simply do not have the breadth or resources to cover in the scope of this paper.[14]

THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE IN WEST PAPUA

The research problem, simply stated, is that Christendom influenced by western modernist theology does not have terms or even space for a non-scientific process of exorcism and spiritual healing. Paul Hiebert coined this the "excluded middle", a vacuum in discourse of that which, in West Papuan terms and culture, connects local spirits, ancestors, and possessions to everyday experiences.[15] In Hiebert's model, western Christians view the world as that which is visible (or material) and that which is invisible (immaterial things like God, heaven, and hell). The excluded middle refers to those things that are both immaterial and of this world, such as spirits. Though the imported western Christianity does not have the terminology or

harness these spirits. Among West Papuans, the term is also used disparagingly for Indonesian spies.

[14] In a similar vein, while there is assuredly much of value to be mined from comparisons to other studies of witchcraft or indigenous spirituality in other Melanesian contexts, those fall outside the scope of this paper for two reasons. The first is simply the pragmatics of space. The second reason is that most, if not all, of the theological reflections (as opposed to the literature dealing with the pragmatics of sorcery-based violence) make the same *a priori* assumption about local spirits. That is, a scientific view of the world supersedes and replaces a spirit-based view of the world.

[15] For a more sustained treatment of the effects this "excluded middle" has had on Melanesian theology, see William K. Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology: A Response to Foreign Theologies" in *Living in the Family of Jesus: Critical Contextualization in Melanesia and Beyond* (ed. William K. Longgar and Tim Meadowcroft; Archer Studies in Pacific Christianity; Auckland: Archer Press, 2016), 29–56.

theology to address these phenomena, the West Papuans have not abandoned their local spirits, and neither have the spirits abandoned West Papua.

Unpacking the spiritual reality in West Papua is complex to say the least.[16] West Papua is home to more than 250 tribes, each with its own local customs and beliefs. "Each of the hundreds of distinctive, largely tribal, language-based culture groups inhabited their own localised cosmos and developed unique traditions, customs and mythology based on their experiences that acted to help make sense of their lives."[17] The spiritual beliefs were thus born from a relationship with the land. Adding to the diverse landscape of spiritual beliefs, even different families within the same tribe may have different language and beliefs about *suanggi*. There are some overarching themes that are common throughout indigenous beliefs. *Suanggi* can refer to ancestor spirits, personal spiritual beings akin to angels or demons, or the spirits that inhabit inanimate objects in nature. *Suanggi* can be good or bad. There is not a clear distinction between "black" and "white" spiritual practices. A person may perform rituals to ensure safety and a successful harvest and at the same time perform rituals to curse an enemy.

Operating simultaneously in the West Papuan consciousness is a dimension of Christian belief brought in by missionaries beginning in 1855. Though slow to take root in the nineteenth century, Christianity spread rapidly throughout West Papua in the first half of the twentieth century, resulting in a current estimate of more than 70% of indigenous West Papuans claiming Christianity as their religion. The spread of Christianity brought many positive social changes, including an end to the payback killings and a growing sense of a national identity. Most indigenous West Papuans view the spread of Christianity as a positive influence over the region.

When Christianity spread to West Papua, it was accompanied by the missionaries' modernist worldview.[18] An oft-quoted signpost of liberal

[16] For a deeper unpacking of the complexities of religion on West Papua, see Gary W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Cambridge, UK, 1991); Gary W. Trompf, *Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions* (Cambridge: Camabridge University Press, 1994); and Susanna G. Rizzo, "From Paradise Lost to Promised Land: Christianity and the Rise of West Papuan Nationalism" (PhD diss., Wollongong, 2004).
[17] Campbell, "Religion and Resistance in West Papua," 33.
[18] Renowned missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 18, observed that from this secular-modern worldview, western Christian missionaries inadvertently acted as one of the biggest propagators of secularisation across the globe.

theology's abandonment of the supernatural at work in this world is from an essay on demythologisation by Rudolf Bultmann, perhaps the most influential New Testament scholar in the twentieth century: "One cannot use an electric light and the radio, or make use of modern medicine and clinical resources in cases of illness, and at the same time believe in the spirit- and wonder-world of the New Testament."[19] This liberal protestant theology—stemming from a line that includes Spinoza (although a Jew, an important conversation partner in the development of western Christian theology), Hegel, D. F. Strauss, and Harnack—has led to suspicion if not outright incredulity towards any talk of demons, angels, miracles, and certainly nature spirits or ancestor spirits amongst theologians or in churches.[20]

Religion for the West has been built upon abstract and propositional truth claims whereas for Melanesians—including West Papuans—"religion is experience rather than knowledge … It is not concerned with propositional truth, but with a demonstration of power in daily life."[21] The western church, largely, has ignored those parts of culture that do not fit in with a modernist worldview of the "supernatural." Even the word "supernatural" indicates a western outlook of delineating the natural from the spiritual; on the other hand, "the Melanesian is born to the knowledge that he lives and works within a spirit world."[22] But West Papuans have been asked to leave behind

[19] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 18. While Bultmann is often quoted as anti-supernatural, David Congdon, "Demystifying the Program of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Theological Hermeneutics," *Harvard Theological Review* 110 (2017): 1–23, at 21, writes convincingly that Bultmann's aim was not to tie theology and Biblical studies to a modern worldview, but in fact to provide the tools to critique all worldviews, especially against the German church's adoption of the Nazi party's politicisation of modern ideologies.

[20] This is, of course, a generalisation for the sake of argument. There are pockets of Christianity that have emerged from post-modernity that have acknowledged the shortcomings of this rationalist, modernist outlook. Walter Wink noted modernism's inadequacy in meeting human needs three decades ago, and a shift towards pneumatology has led to openness in theological circles towards the spiritual realm. This openness, it seems, has not spread into West Papuan Christianity as reported by the spiritual healer, recent refugees, or other missionaries I have spoken with. For more on the pneumatological turn, see Amos Yong, "On Binding and Loosing the Spirits: Navigating and Engaging a Spirit-filled World," in *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World* (ed. V. Karkkainen, K. Kim, and A. Yong; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–14.

[21] Marilyn Rowsome, "Melanesian Traditional Religion," *MJT* 17/2 (2001): 36–56, at 37.

[22] Bernard M. Narokobi, "What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?" in *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues* (ed. James Knight; Goroka, PNG: Melanesian

that which does not fit into a modern worldview. An Australian West Papuan relates, "One of the trends now is, embrace your culture, embrace your culture. But only selections from our culture. The dark parts like *suanggi* are taboo to talk about and left out." The reality of the situation is that for most West Papuan Christians, the tribal traditions are not left behind, but merely shut out of the Christian conversations.

Benny Giay reflects on the failure of western Christianity to address indigenous spirituality:

> I think Christianity as it has been preached by Western missionaries in West Papua for years has destroyed some of the essential elements of Christian values found in Papuan culture. Christianity as Western missionaries have presented to Papuans overemphasized one element—restoring man's relationship to God—while neglecting social and ecological dimensions.
>
> From the West Papuans' cultural viewpoint, man is in trouble and going through crises because man's relationships with his neighbor, the natural environment, and spirit forces have been broken. Man's task, if he is to be whole, is to renew and maintain harmonious relationships with (a) spiritual beings, (b) the natural environment, and (c) neighbors.[23]

The problem is that by and large the West Papuan church's worldview does not match the reality of West Papuans' daily life or worldview, and subsequently the church's offerings fail to meet the people on their own terms. This silence by the church on these issues is brought forward in the accounts of the spiritual healer as well as other missionaries in West Papua. While there are some churches, pastors, or priests who do acknowledge the *suanggi*'s role in West Papuan life, many of those who undergo spiritual suffering do not turn to the church for healing or counsel. There are many accounts of devout Christians attending church on Sunday morning and then turning to spirits as a source of healing or power on the same day.[24] William Longgar, former principal of the Christian Leaders' Training College of Papua New Guinea, writes that pragmatism and survival buttress this bifocal form of religiosity:

Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1977), 7–13, at 9.

[23] Tanebaum Center, "Toward a Zone of Peace," 419.

[24] It is of interest to note that largely, Melanesians resist syncretism (integrating tribal aspects into Christianity until it is no longer recognisable as Christianity), but rather let these different forms of religion operate simultaneously without incongruence or dissonance in their own understanding.

> Pragmatism or realism is the one trademark of traditional Melanesian spirituality, and is deeply embedded in the religious consciousness of the people. Rituals are performed for a variety of maladies, with concrete results expected instantly. If there are no results, rituals are changed until the right one that effects the result is discovered.[25]

When Christianity as preached in churches fails to meet the pragmatic and real needs of the people, Melanesians often turn towards other rituals or spiritualities until they find something that works.

If the problem is that the church does not speak of *suanggi*, it is easy to say the solution is simply for the church to address the phenomenon. But this is much easier said than done. West Papuan society is a complex structure of tribal beliefs and practices operating simultaneously with Christian beliefs and practices. Added to that complexity is the influence of modernity and globalisation. Australian academic Paul James writes that each of these asymmetrical modes of operation, understood as ontological categories or realities, overlap and are "always in tension with each other".[26] These layers—or perhaps better termed as Heideggerian horizons—culminate in a cumulative condition in which the West Papuan church, given its imported *a priori* assumptions about spirits, cannot speak to the experience of *suanggi* as a theological reality until it first addresses these presuppositions.

The real question is thus, how can the church speak *authentically* of and in the spiritual world of West Papuan culture? Missiologists—indeed even the missionaries to Melanesia—have long understood that one must take seriously the spirituality of West Papuan culture. But that has almost always been on the terms of a western post-enlightenment perspective. One cannot simply speak of spiritual activity as something that happens outside the church's reality. It is far too easy to dismiss spirits, sorcery, or witchcraft as a phenomenon only at work through psychosomatic cultural belief systems as many Christian theologians—even those who are Melanesian—are wont to do.[27] We must first listen to the lived experience and the spiritual realities

[25] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 47.

[26] Paul James, "On Being Religious: Towards an Alternative Theory of Religion and Secularity," *The Occasional Papers, Institute for Culture and Society* 8/2 (2017), no pages. See also Paul James, Paul *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* (London: Sage, 2006).

[27] This line of reasoning can be seen in a recent article on sorcery and witchcraft in Papua New Guinea, Gabriel Kuman, "Sorcery, Witchcraft and Development in Papua New Guinea" *Pastoral & Socio-Cultural Journal for Melanesia* 41 (2009): 19–37, at 20: "The writer

as communicated by West Papuans. Then, and only then, we must work towards a way to authentically enter into the reality of *suanggi*, spirits, possession, and exorcism.

UN-TABOOING THE SPIRITUAL FORCES

Hiebert proposes a solution that moves theology towards a re-incorporation of the middle level of discourse into our conversations and understanding of the world:

> On the middle level, a holistic theology includes a theology of God in human history: in the affairs of nations, of peoples and of individuals. This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision and healing; of ancestors, spirits and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortune and death.[28]

This world of unseen, supernatural forces is in no way separate from that seen and perceived by the ordinary senses. Indeed, the case studies related by the spiritual healer and conversations with West Papuan refugees in Australia indicate that for many, spirits can be perceived not only by portents and signs in nature, but the spirits themselves actually can be seen and heard.

Exegetes have long noted the evergreen need to translate the New Testament worldview across *every other* worldview including our own. Whether western or indigenous West Papuan, we are always faced with the mandate to examine our own prejudices and biases when encountering the complex horizons of tribal beliefs, Christian traditions, and modernity that shape West Papuan culture. In the words of Aboriginal Australian theologian Garry Deverell, "The gospel is always already a translation of a translation of the eternal word uttered by the Father in Jesus Christ and animating the hearts, imaginations and cultural performances of human beings in every time and place."[29] In freeing the *kerygma* (the preaching of the gospel) from

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believes that people's own psychic and emotional reactions often lead to physical and emotional discomforts and misfortune due to the people's strong belief that such an evil force still exists and functions." In this vein, some argue that speaking of these dark spiritual forces only serves to fuel the fear that causes these psychosomatic maladies. While stoking fear is definitely a valid concern, ignoring the existing fear and spiritual realities is just another way of empowering the darkness (Luke 8:17; Eph 5:13).

[28] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 46.

[29] Garry Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawloolway Man Reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morningstar Publishing, 2018), 30.

any singular or set of worldviews, the theological and pastoral concerns move away from a process that would systematise or rationalise away the experience of spirit activity in West Papua.

As we work to translate the gospel into this West Papuan context, we must remember first and foremost, that the gospel message is not an abstract-able principle. *Kergyma* is always incarnational, and thus grounded in the reality of the person of Christ. There is little benefit in claims such as "the kernel of the gospel is X" or the "true message behind the mythology of the New Testament is Y." The gospel, instead, is rooted in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus by his incarnation into a specific time, place, and culture gives licence to encounter spiritual phenomenon as reality. His earthly ministry consisted of casting out demons and healing the sick. Christ's earthly ministry was soteriological—not only in terms of saving one's soul from eternal damnation, but from the Greek root, σώζω (sṓzō) meaning to deliver, protect, or heal both figuratively and literally.[30] Bernard Narokobi writes, "I have no doubt that, had Christ been born into Melanesia, He would have come to fulfill, and make more perfect, the Melanesian religious experience."[31] To truly understand and live out the gospel in a West Papuan context, we must enter fully and incarnationally into the West Papuan world of spirits, *suanggi*, possession, and exorcisms that shape Melanesian culture.[32]

At this point, we must acknowledge a few of the many pitfalls that accompany any endeavor to integrate a world of spirits into our understanding of Christian theology. One such danger is placing Christ at the top of a spiritual pantheon, and making him merely the main god or entity worshipped among many. Hiebert warns against a second danger, "The church and mission must guard against Christianity itself becoming a new form of magic. Magic is based on a mechanistic view—a formula approach to reality that allows humans to control their own destiny."[33] This is already

[30] Daniel Thiagarajah and John Bottomley, *The Bones of the Righteous shall never be Broken: Finding God's Faithfulness in Dark Times* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2016), 124.

[31] Narakobi, "What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?" 11.

[32] While noting an absence of theology and preaching addressing *suanggi*, it is important to acknowledge the vital and life-giving work that has been done by missiologists and Melanesian theologians on bringing the gospel into a Melanesian context. A full bibliography cannot be given here, but a wonderful starting point is the collection of essays in Longgar and Meadowcroft, *Living in the Family of Jesus*.

[33] Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 46.

a danger in Melanesia, where the God of Christianity has been incorporated into a culture that sees spirits as commandable entities engaged to facilitate aims and ambitions, from helping crops to grow to striking down one's enemies. Theologian Joshua Damoi writes of this turn to a form of prosperity gospel, "Some people in Papua New Guinea have seen the idea of being a Christian as putting God under obligation. They attended church services, helped the minister, and carried out church activities, in order to put God under obligation."[34] In this transactional view of faith, one exchanges devotion, piety, or money for wealth, health, and happiness.[35]

Another potential pitfall is the over-romanticising of a pre-Christian culture, falling into the trap of fetishising the idea of a "noble savage." Garry Deverell writes poignantly of this danger:

> Any and all insistence about working from 'purely' Indigenous traditions—unpolluted by Western or Christian influences—is therefore not only naïve but also deeply disrespectful of Indigenous people. It fails to recognize that it is precisely our ability to adapt and respond to colonial perspectives, to absorb them creatively into our own, that has made the difference between our surviving and not surviving.[36]

In other words, we cannot turn back a historical dial and undo that which has been done in either Melanesia or in the scholarship of biblical studies and theology.[37]

Moving forward, as we can see, is no simple task. However, using the very tools of western theology, we can learn to dismantle our prejudices and *a priori* assumptions. Through the journey of incarnation, the lived experience of West Papuans invites us to expand our theological reality.

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[34] Joshua Daimoi, "Understanding Melanesians", *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17/2 (2001): 6–22, at 15.

[35] A notable line of further inquiry would be on the way the West Papuan principle of reciprocity affects indigenous spirituality. In interpersonal and intertribal relations, the principle of reciprocity rather than transaction functions to keep peace by establishing a relationship rather than a mere exchange of goods.

[36] Deverell, *Gondwana Theology*, 41

[37] While the biblical cosmology may indeed be closer to a pre-Christian West Papuan cosmology, it is important to remember that, as James D. G. Dunn and Graham Twelftree, "Demon-possession and exorcism in the New Testament", *Churchman* 94 (1980): 210–225, at 222, point out, "the New Testament neither contains nor is interested in a fully worked out demonology."

What does theology that thus takes *suanggi*, spirits, possessions, and exorcisms seriously look like?

A Way Forward

In order to give flesh, so to speak, to this idea that theology must enter into and come out of the spiritual aspects of our world, we will examine one of the cases recorded by the spiritual healer. In this way, we begin a serious theological address of *suanggi* in West Papua that challenges the taboo imposed by western ideas of rationalism and determinism via twentieth-century Christianity.

First, a summary of the case.

This case from May 2018 involves an eighteen-year-old West Papuan woman who had recently graduated from high school, a member of the Gereja Kristen Injili (GKI), the largest Protestant denomination in West Papua.[38] On a visit to her aunt's house, she ran into the spiritual healer. The spiritual healer was a family friend and had known the young woman from previous visits. Sensing something was wrong from her demeanour, the healer instructed the young woman to enter a room that had been used for healing prayer. There, the healer, the young woman, her aunt, and her grandmother prayed for her for five hours. During this process, she experienced physical convulsions, crying, and emitted frightening vocal expressions. When the healing was complete and the *suanggi* had left her, she related that the previous night two *suanggi* had entered the locked house where she and her sister were staying alone at two o'clock in the morning. The *suanggi* had appeared as dark, black beings in the shape of men, and in a threatening way, forced her into a suicide pact. Earlier on the day that the exorcism was performed, she had prepared a poison to carry out the planned suicide that night. When the exorcism was complete, the spiritual healer instructed the young woman to stay close to her aunt, pray, study the Bible, and to continue to worship God. Through the relationship with the family, the spiritual healer has regularly followed up to ensure her continued wellbeing.

[38] Marcus Campbell, "Papua and West Papua," *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South* (ed. Mark A. Lamport; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 851–856.

For the scope of this paper, as an initial foray into the reality of the *suanggi* filled world of West Papuans, I want to focus on the uniquely Christian perspectives in this case.[39]

One framework for theological analysis asks the question: If God is present in all circumstances, where is God in this event? More specifically, how does this case reflect the incarnation of Christ and the continued irruption (apocalyptic in-breaking) of the kingdom of God into West Papua? How does the reality of what occurred in the West Papuan's life reflect the reality of the world and of the kingdom of God as reflected in Scripture?

One of the central themes of Jesus' message is that the kingdom of God has entered into our reality. Indeed, as Rowan Williams writes, "The Bible assumes, from beginning to end, that this material flesh is made to be inhabited and that the whole material world is made to be inhabited by the action of God."[40] Though our world is fractured, God does not sit distantly or idly while people suffer. God is in the deliverance and healing of those who are oppressed and sick, not only from a spiritual sickness in terms of eternal salvation, but God also affirms the goodness of human life in our everyday reality. The scriptural witness of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm that God comes to give life and healing (Exod 23:35, Deut 32:39, Isa 57:18–19, John 10:10). When a young woman is delivered from the reality of *suanggi* attacks, through prayer, God is in the spiritual deliverance and in this affirmation of life. At the heart, this act of healing prayer is about affirming life. The act of expelling the *suanggi* is an action of restoration within the young woman. The suicidal impulse is cast out in the work of spiritual healing, restoring the affirmation that creaturely life belongs to God.[41]

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[39] That is not to say that the psychological, sociological, body-political, Foucauldian, feminist/womanist, and post-colonial questions, while notably western, are not vital to the painting of the full ethical picture. Those inter-disciplinary critiques and questions need to be raised, and I hope they will be raised in future studies. Similarly, while there is much to be gained in examining how stories of possession and healing relate to Melanesian culture, especially ideas of harmony, *mana*, authority, leadership, consensus, community, and kinship, those questions fall outside the scope of this paper.

[40] Rowan Williams, "The Theology of Faith and Healing," lecture delivered at Holy Rood House Centre for Health and Pastoral Care, Thirsk, 2003.

[41] This relates strongly to the undercurrent of Melanesian spirituality that affirms the sacredness of life or *mana*. See Daimoi, "Understanding Melanesians," 8.

Biblical scholar Paul Hollenbach connected demonic possession directly to colonial oppression: "Situations of social tension such as the following are often indicated as the causal context of possession: class antagonisms rooted in economic exploitation, conflicts between traditions where revered traditions are eroded, colonial domination and revolution."[42] Building on that thesis, New Testament scholar Cheryl Pero examines the Markan exorcism pericopes and concludes that the exorcisms performed by Jesus operate simultaneously and holistically at a dual level of spiritual and material redemption.[43] The Markan exorcisms are redemptive in that they involve the restoration of creation to the original state of wholeness and goodness. In this case, the exorcism speaks to the death-dealing spiritual reality attacking the young woman, and in engaging the powers of death in *suanggi*, the exorcism may also speak a word of resistance to the death-dealing political reality of the material oppression of Indonesia.

We must also affirm the belief that healing, whether spiritual or physical, is more than a mere demonstration of divine power addressing individual illness.[44] This act of exorcism brings eschatological hope into the present reality. The healing demonstrates that God is in control of the spiritual world through the casting out of the evil spirits and that God is in control of the physical world in preventing the young woman's death by suicide. In a world that may seem overrun by external forces—whether *suanggi*, Indonesian occupation, or familial dysfunction—God's kingdom is here on earth, and there is hope of restoration. This case of spiritual healing brings hope of restoration of relationship—right relationship to God, to fellow human, and to oneself.

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[42] Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A socio-historical study," *JAAR* 49 (1982): 567–588, at 573. Hollenbach's thesis is that the Roman occupation of Palestine led to a psychosomatic mental health disorder resulting from commoners who resented their hopeless plight on the margins. While the phenomena of *suanggi* certainly predates the Indonesian occupation, one cannot view the phenomena in today's context without noting the background of military presence and human rights violations in West Papua.

[43] Cheryl Pero, *Liberation from Empire: Demonic Possession and Exorcism in the Gospel of Mark* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 150; New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2013).

[44] We are reminded here of Jesus' assertion that his ministry is both material and spiritual in the synoptic accounts of the healing of the paralytic at Capernaum. (Matt 9:4, Mark 2:9, Luke 5:23)

A fundamental Christian truth is that our human experience is reformulated and re-envisioned through faith. Christianity, as proclaimed in the scriptural witness from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, informs how we reflect on stories of *suanggi* like the story above. The active agents at work in the story are the *suanggi*, the healing team, God, and the young woman experiencing spiritual attack. The *suanggi*, much like the demons in the New Testament, work against goodness, life, and thus work against God. The demons or spirits are not powerless, but they are rendered powerless when confronted with the power of the Holy Spirit. The healing team works to fulfill the *missio Dei* as they understand it: to bring life, healing, and casting out of evil spirits (Mark 6:7–13). It is always a step of faith, and not of command, when the healing team petitions God for deliverance and healing. God is at work in and through this entire ordeal, not as one under obligation, but as the God who has come to give abundant life.

The young woman who experienced the healing is also not without agency. We must be very careful in reflection by resisting that very human urge to explain the "why" of the spiritual attack upon this young woman. As Jesus said in John's gospel, the cause of sickness or suffering is not necessarily directly correlated to any wrongdoing or sin. Her role in this story is joining in prayer with the healing team and taking that step towards God and towards life in allowing the healing team to pray for her deliverance from the *suanggi*. Perhaps just as important to the story are the unmentioned agents, such as the rest of the family, the community, the pastors, and the church. The role they did or did not play in this dramatic battle against the demonic is important to acknowledge and a place for further investigation. In this sense, we must note that the spiritual healing and oppression takes place in a complex socio-political-relational-cultural nexus. The church's work is not only spiritual and must confront trauma both materially and spiritually.

This act of exorcism reinforces the principles that God is the giver of life, and that God is at work in the reality of our world both spiritually and materially. All humans and spirits are agents in the drama that unfolds in history. This drama is witnessed by the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and continues to unfold today. We live in the already and the not yet—living in the tension of a world radically broken and yet radically redeemed. With the person and work of Christ the kingdom of God broke into this world. It

is an act of faith that we enter into the reality of the world—*suanggi* included—proclaiming God's kingdom and the life that God brings.

CONCLUSION

To summarise where we have come thus far: we identified the problem of the excluded middle; we posited a solution of dismantling our own worldview's biases and presuppositions in order to enter into the reality of another; we heard one account of spiritual attack and deliverance and then reflected on the theological implications of acknowledging this compounded cultural reality.

There are countless pages to be filled with further description and analysis. Before concluding, I want to offer a non-exhaustive list of issues that this paper could not directly address but are likely connected to the spiritual phenomena of *suanggi* in West Papua. Hans Austnaberg, whose dissertation described exorcisms in Madagascar, poses the question, "Is exorcism only a cultural expression of certain needs or does it reflect a transcendent reality?"[45] In that vein, I believe there is much to be uncovered in following Hollenbach's thesis that imperial occupation correlates with symptoms of spiritual oppression. What are the psychological and spiritual implications of living under occupation? What spiritual trauma may be inflicted by dark spiritual powers exacerbating physical and psychological trauma, and how can the church and an emerging nation address it? Along similar lines, there have been recent reports of spiritually assisted hypnosis as an effective way of addressing trauma, which are comparable to some descriptions of healing prayer.[46] There is also more to uncover through sociological engagement of the phenomenon, examining socio-economic status, family dynamics, and education. A further line of enquiry would be to compare how the work of the *dukun*, the local spiritual guides and healers, correlates and critiques these stories of a westerner performing exorcism.

This story of *suanggi* attack and of subsequent deliverance is a message not just for West Papua, but for all of Christendom: God affirms life; God

[45] Hans Austnaberg, *Shepherds and Demons: A Study of Exorcism as Practised by and Understood by Shepherds in the Malagasy Lutheran Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 6.

[46] C. B. J. Lesmana, L. K. Suryani, G. D. Jensen, and N. Tiliopoulos, "A Spiritual-Hypnosis Assisted Treatment of Children with PTSD after the 2002 Bali Terrorist Attack," *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 52 (2009): 23–34.

affirms the redemption and restoration of a good creation; and we must hold to hope in faith that even in the depths of despair God will redeem all things—*suanggi* included. American poet Christian Wiman once said that the goal of poetry is to "add to the stock of available reality."[47] I hope that this engagement with the realities of the phenomenon of *suanggi* in West Papua has in some measure added to our collective stock of available theological reality.

[47] Christian Wiman, "How Does One Remember God?" *On Being*, broadcast interview of Christian Wiman by Krista Tippett, 2012.