

# Getting to know our Neighbours

An Indigenous Theology Symposium met at the Brisbane campus of the Australian Catholic University in June last year. Philip Gibbs, a Catholic priest working in PNG, was one of the speakers addressing the cutting edge of indigenous theology in our region. This is an edited text of his lecture.



Papua New Guinea is a nation comprising hundreds of cultures. Despite the plurality of beliefs and practices, there are themes such as Melanesian spirituality that are common throughout the region.

Melanesian spirituality has been defined as a search for, maintenance of, and celebration of life. The primary concern is for growth, fertility, health, wealth and success.

Traditional Melanesian spirituality is non-theistic. In a few cases where there is a high god, it is at best a *deus otiosus* – a “retired god”.

The main practical concern is to keep channels of life open, which means maintaining and strengthening relationships with people and other elements of the cosmos.

This is accomplished through rituals, often in the form of exchange. Such cosmic spirituality is not concerned with an intellectual quest, but rather a quest for life involving survival and wellbeing.

Some have labelled traditional Melanesian spirituality as magical and superstitious. This is because it is not concerned so much with the ultimate source of life-giving power in a transcendent God, but rather with the availability and immediate use of power to bring about life and wellbeing – found in healers, sorcerers and ancestral spirits.

Scholars investigating Melanesian spirituality often use a “biocosmic” explanation for the use of non-theistic symbols representing sacred reality in Melanesian religion. The biocosmic religious experience does not refer to an ultimate called God

(*theos*), but to an ultimate experience as *bios* (life). It is characterised by the experience of “something” which is absolutely necessary for existence; of “something” in which everything participates. Mantovani<sup>1</sup> says that this “something” is *bios* or life. The more a reality participates in that life, the stronger, healthier, richer and more important that reality becomes.

If life ebbs away, then sickness and eventually death follows. Life, in this context, is material, biological and spiritual.

The term “cosmic” is used in the understanding that everything participates in cosmic life in various degrees and everything is bound together by it. Animals and plants may be distinguished from humans, but are still linked together into a *cosmos*. Everything that exists shares in the same “life” – hence the term “biocosmic.”

The symbolism of the biocosmic experience is not vertical as the experience with *theos* tends to be, but horizontal, with a stress on blood, the womb, the tomb, the phallus.

## God as *theos* was introduced to PNG by Christian missionaries

According to Mantovani, Christianity was not totally unbiased, as it grew out of Israel which, in order to survive as an ethnic group, had to fight against the agrarian biocosmic religions of Canaan. The fight for survival did not allow Israel to dialogue with the biocosmic religious experience and its symbols (Mantovani 2000: 85)<sup>2</sup>.

Christianity followed suit and it was God as *theos* who was introduced to Papua New Guinea by the Christian missionaries – with seemingly little concern for Melanesian biocosmic issues of gardens, growth, and fertility in all its forms.

1. Mantovani, Ennio. “Discussion: Is there a Biocosmic Religion? A Reply to Dr Garland,” *Catalyst* 16 (4) (1986) 352-366.

2. Mantovani, Ennio, *Divine Revelation and the Religions of PNG: A Missiological Manual*, Goroka: Melanesian Institute. 2000.

Christianity had to introduce sin, as the cause of the lack of true life and as the reason for the death of Jesus.

Theoretically, the “biocosmic” religious experience of Melanesian spirituality could focus on life-giving love without needing human sinfulness as a motive for that love to appear.

For Mantovani this biocosmic experience is part of God’s revelation to the people of Melanesia going back thousands of years prior to the coming of Christianity. He claims that today Christianity does not need an ethnic identity, as was the case with Israel. Christianity subsists in a plurality of local churches and is thus free to dialogue with different forms of religious experience (Mantovani 2000: 98).

Mantovani’s explanation is somewhat akin to other explanations of how “cosmic” religions are concerned with sacred, womanly, earthly matters. They represent the basic posture that *homo religiosus* adopts towards the mysteries of life.<sup>3</sup>

Mantovani’s insights based on his experience in the field and on comparative religion and phenomenology are valuable; however I am left with remaining questions.

- Is the life of the human person simply *bios*? Could more attention be given to the value of the human person (*anthropos*) in relation to *bios* and *cosmos*?
- Secondly, how does one do ‘theo-logy’ without a *theos*?
- Thirdly, in Christian theology, how can one best include Christ in dialogue with indigenous spiritualities, particularly in the context of changing contemporary realities? I could refer back to discussion on such issues within literature originating in Papua New Guinea – principally that from the Melanesian Institute.

Until now in Melanesia the discussion has been mostly dualistic. It compares cosmic spirituality and its concern for the earth, nature, wellbeing and exchange, with their equivalents in metacosmic spirituality – heaven, transcendence, salvation and grace. I have noted how Melanesian Christians may acknowledge the metacosmic beliefs of Christianity, while cosmic spirituality continues as

part of the deep underlying religious dimension of a person’s faith.<sup>4</sup>

Panikkar<sup>5</sup> helps support endeavours to think beyond dualism in terms of “as-well-as” rather than “either-or.”

Panikkar’s view of *anthropos* in relationship to matter and divine is also useful in the indigenous worldview that naturally understands the person as self conscious within a web of relationships. The Melanesian person develops independence of character within a socio-centric rather than an individualistic environment.

Broadening the context beyond the social, to the cosmic and the divine could surely enrich our understanding of the person as not just socio-centric but at the crossroads (not the center) of the threefold horizon of being

## Panikkar concludes that ‘theo-logy’ too often seeks to entrap God in our human categories

Panikkar concludes that theo-logy or the human science of God all too often seeks to entrap God in our human categories. The only way to redeem theo-logy is to treat it as a subjective genitive; that is, as the word of God to which we may listen.

Indigenous spiritualities such as those from Papua New Guinea appear not to use theistic symbolism. Nor do they entertain accounts of *theos* entering into human history.

The indigenous mythos is about the search for life. The source of life may at times be symbolised in a Dema figure who dies and is buried – the symbol of life emerging from the Dema figure’s grave. Yet the origin of that life is a cosmic energy, not a personal one.

4. Gibbs, Philip, “It’s in the Blood,” South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies. No 31 (Dec. 2004) 22-27

5. Panikkar, Raimon *The Rhythm of Being*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010.

– , *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1998 (First published 1993 by Orbis books, Maryknoll, New York).

– , *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003 (First published in Italian by Jaca books in 1999).

3. Picris, Aloysius, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988. p 71

If one leaves theistic notions aside and considers Divine mystery as the ultimate source of life and being, then there is room for viewing this as a *locus theologicus* for indigenous theology.

Indigenous spirituality can be considered theology when it enables us to become aware of where the different symbols of the *theos* find a common arena in response to the wonder of existence and the gift of life (Panikkar 2010: 206).

Can insights that seek a different *mythos* from that of orthodox monotheism assist in the dialogue between Christian theology and indigenous spiritualities?

Panikkar is wary of Christologies being a Western product bound by the history of culture and the monotheism inherited from Abrahamic tradition (Panikkar 2003: 4,7).

He introduces the concept of “Christophany” as the manifestation of Christ to human consciousness including both the mystical experience of Christ as being one with the Father and a critical reflection on that experience (Panikkar 2003: 10).

He does not want to reduce the reflection on Christ to a doctrinal or intellectual method proper to Christology, but seeks to go beyond that aided by what he calls the “third eye.”

The first eye is that of the senses; the second, that of the intellect; the third is the mystical vision facilitated by the spirit.

For the “third eye” of mystical vision Panikkar draws upon the Indic notion of *advaita* – a non-dualistic conception of reality as interrelatedness. (It is not limited to Indic notions, since he notes that the polytheism of African religions is *advaitic*) (Panikkar 2010: 164). *Advaita* does not say “either-or” but “as well as”. The focus is not on two poles of a dialectic, but rather on an awareness of the relationship that exists.

For example, “nothingness” is the dialectical negation of “being”. In contrast, “absence” (Spanish - *nada*) is not negation but the awareness of emptiness surrounding being. The awareness of an absence only makes sense together with the presence of whose absence we are aware. There is not the one without the other (Panikkar 2010: 314). This is *advaita*.

Reason alone cannot grasp Christophany, but the third eye of mystical intuition can. The “third eye” of the mystical intellect does not depend on us seeing or knowing, but comes into being when we are conscious that we are seen or known.

A stone may be felt; it may be known; but it may also be a symbol of the temple and the temple may be a symbol of the divinity for those able to participate in the *mythos* that provides a horizon of intelligibility for the symbol.

Too often rationalism blinds us to the wisdom of the “third eye” of mystical intuition. With the aid of the third eye it is possible to view Jesus Christ as one of the most powerful symbols “encompassing (not to say incarnating) in himself corporeality (matter), humanity (consciousness), and divinity (infinite)” (Panikkar 2010: 304).

It is relevant here to note how Panikkar also utilizes the term *incarnatio continua*. Christianity is a historical religion. But Christ is more than historical reality. “Christ has appeared as king, soldier, knight, pacifist, friend of the poor, rebel and madman” (Panikkar 2003: 174).

## Too often rationalism blinds us to the wisdom of the “third eye” of mystical intuition

The incarnation takes place in a specific cultural milieu and so in effect is already an inculturation. At the same time it transforms the culture that receives it. Authentic Christians are unique participants in the *incarnatio continua* as persons who have experienced the reality of Christ.

Christ is not an “other”; I am not Christ; we are neither one nor two. This is the non-dual relation of the person in the experience of *advaita* (Panikkar 2003: 77).

Panikkar distinguishes three moments of consciousness: nonhistorical; historical – which includes the rational-scientific; and transhistorical consciousness that amounts to experiencing the sacredness of the secular and includes the cosmotheandric experience (Panikkar 1993: 121).

Traditional Melanesian spirituality would be considered nonhistorical.

Panikkar observes correctly that the elites of pre-industrial societies are trying to change the mode of consciousness of their people in order to introduce the historical consciousness “which is a prerequisite for industrialisation or revolution” (Panikkar 1993: 126).

Unfortunately, if they have not done so already, they will find that they are exchanging a

transcendent heaven for the few in the “next life”, for a fulfillment in the future that turns out to be not very bright in either the historical or the vertical dimensions.

The fact is that a substantial proportion of humanity has not reached the minimal level of the *humanum*.

Arguments for the uniqueness of Christ aside, indigenous spirituality becomes Christian theology with the introduction of Jesus Christ as the primary symbol of life who came to reveal life in its fullness, not just *bios*. This is not about incarnation in the traditional sense or fulfilment of pre-existent revelation. Jesus Christ represents a special image of the divine allowing one to have a personal relationship within the divine mystery.

As *anthropos*, we humans are at a meeting point of the three dimensions (spiritual, intellectual and material) and we see this represented in a special way in Christ.

In order for this to happen we need a “new *mythos*” because the myths of progress, science, technology, history, democracy and similar stories to which many of our contemporaries cling are no longer held to be true by an increasing number of responsible thinkers (Pannikar 2010: 374).

An alternative is still on the horizon; however Pannikar claims that we will find it in the advaitic myth of the cosmotheandric trinity: *cosmos-anthropos-theos* (Pannikar 2010: 404).

Indigenous spiritualities exist today alongside a multiplicity of ideologies and beliefs, including the secular *mythos* of the modern industrialised world.

Papua New Guinea is facing a boom in multinational mining and natural gas projects that strain the physical, human, moral and spiritual resources to the limit. People are competing to acquire a share of the spoils. For example, with regards to land, there appears to be little concern for the sacredness of land in the midst of the skirmish for monetary compensation.

Pannikar views modern technology in negative terms – calling it technocracy because it reduces life to the sensible and rational, forgetful of the mystical.

He thinks that the only possibility for the future entails “a creative transformation of human culture, taking into account the human experience of the last six millennia in its positive and negative aspects” (Pannikar 2010: 319).

In proposing a cosmotheandric attitude he wants to rescue the divine from being considered a separate entity floating somewhere above and beyond the rest of reality.

Pannikar presents three aspects of cosmotheandric spirituality as it relates to the contemporary world:

- Firstly, cosmotheandric spirituality seeks to transform the *cosmos*. Humanity is not simply a part of the *cosmos*, but a part of the very destiny of reality. Humankind is not passive, but can affect the whole adventure of being. “Man is an unfinished ‘product’ of the hands of the Creator because the human task is to achieve the unfinished portions by bringing to fulfilment both oneself and the surrounding world” (Pannikar 2010: 350). We cooperate with the divine and share in the divine dimension.

## Myths of progress are no longer held to be true by responsible thinkers

- Secondly, cosmotheandric spirituality is aware of our ecological responsibility in the *oikos* or household. The *oikos* is suffering from an *oikonomia* out of control. Our life on earth is not an accident and we have the responsibility to bring the *oikonomia* under control for the sake of the human household and the *cosmos* as a whole. “Only if the Godhead, the natural World, and Man are seen to belong intrinsically together in a Trinitarian reality will our attitude to the earth cease to be domineering, and become one of real partnering – a partnership with something we ourselves are” (Pannikar 2010: 353).
- Thirdly, cosmotheandric spirituality includes political involvement.

**Philip Gibbs** from New Zealand is a Divine Word Missionary priest working in Papua New Guinea. He has a post graduate diploma in Anthropology (Sydney University) and a doctorate in Theology (Gregorian University, Rome). At present he is Secretary of the Commission for Social Concern for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of PNG.