

“IT’S IN THE BLOOD”: DIALOGUE WITH PRIMAL RELIGION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA¹

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Nowadays interreligious dialogue is accepted and expected. Attitudes were different, however, during the time of first contact between Papua New Guineans and early Christian missionaries. In most cases the “Good News” was presented as a new form of belief and ritual that ran contrary to the people’s traditional religious beliefs and rituals. They were informed that such beliefs and rituals were associated with “evil spirits”. At their baptism people were required to publicly renounce “Satan and all his works and all his pomp”. People interpreted this as renouncing adherence to their traditional religion. Today Papua New Guinea (PNG) calls itself a Christian country with many people of deep faith, even to the point of martyrdom, as attested by Blessed Peter to Rot and many others.

What happened to traditional religion? Did it just disappear—banished along with Satan and other forces of evil? In reality, there were elements in traditional religion that were neither noble nor virtuous, however, negative attitudes to Melanesian traditional religion are, to a large extent, a case of misrepresentation. Most early missionaries and colonial authorities were not equipped to recognise traditional religion for what it was, and the local inhabitants were not prepared or unable to verbalise their religious experiences (Mantovani 1999: 35). Traditional religious beliefs and values continue today in many forms, and the possibility for dialogue remains. After a brief survey of the attitude of the Catholic Church to traditional religions, this paper will describe a contemporary attempt at dialogue with one group of people (Enga) in PNG, and will seek to draw out implications for a wider agenda of dialogue between Christianity and primal religions.

“Natural” Religions or a Preparation for the Gospel?

The Second Vatican Council changed the official Catholic Church view on religious freedom and the attitude to other religions. For example, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church recognised goodness and truth coming from God to be found in Non-Christian religions (LG 16). Following the Council, attention was directed specifically to African traditional religion. A letter from Cardinal Arinze and Fr.

Fitzgerald of the Secretariat for non-Christians (25 March 1988) noted that dialogue with African Traditional Religions should be understood in terms of a pastoral approach that would lead to a more adequate presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that the Church will have deeper roots in the African soil.

Not to be forgotten, five years later, traditional religions in other continents were addressed in a letter from Cardinal Arinze to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Asia, America and the Pacific (21 November, 1993). The document recognises both values and shadows in traditional religions. It places particular importance on a “dialogue of life” and a “dialogue of action”, and advises that the study and knowledge of traditional religions should be part of the formation program in seminaries and religious houses of study. There is also a call for episcopal conferences to appoint a group of competent and skilled people to undertake research in this field.

In his recent 2001 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, Pope John Paul II refers to traditional religion in Oceania as a “challenge” for proclaiming the Gospel in Oceania (#20). In a later section, he notes how the Church in Oceania also needs “to study more thoroughly the traditional religions of the indigenous populations, in order to enter more effectively into the dialogue which Christian proclamation requires” (#25). The Second Vatican Council recognised “grace” in other religions, whereby they play a proper role in the order of salvation as a *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel). Later statements cited above appear to retreat to a “fulfillment” theology, whereby salvation in Christ reaches members of other religions as the divine response, fulfilling natural human (religious) aspirations expressed through their own cultural traditions. If other religions such as traditional religions are regarded as “natural” religions, then they will be seen as playing no essential role in the mystery of salvation. With such a theological standpoint it is hard to see how traditional religions in Oceania could be respected as an equal dialogue partner. Moreover, without a healthy respect, there is the danger that the study of such religions will only promote spiritual scavenging to supply exotic elements for attempts at inculturation.

Helicopters and Cosmic Religion

Why do people so readily exchange their traditional religion for the religion of the missionaries? The simple answer is that they don't. Aloysius Pieris explains the situation in what he calls the “helicopter theory of religious expansion” (Pieris 1996: 66). Pieris says that “cos-

mic” religions—which are another name for traditional or primal religions—are concerned with sacred, womanly, earthly matters. They represent the basic posture that *homo religiosus* adopts towards the mysteries of life (Pieris 1988: 7). Metacosmic religions—concerned with transcendent otherworldly realities—act like helicopters, while the cosmic religions serve as natural landing pads. Their encounter is complementary. Thus, according to Pieris, there is no need for a radical conversion from one to the other. In fact, Pieris sees the cosmic dimension of Asian religions as a source of revelation, manifesting the Asian Christ.

Pieris’ theory helps explain why Thailand is Buddhist and the Philippines Christian. When it comes to metacosmic religions like Buddhism or Christianity arriving at a cosmic landing pad it is “first come, first served”. Once a helicopter has landed, another cannot land on the same pad. Thus, mass conversions from one metacosmic religion to the other are improbable. Christian breakthroughs have come in places where cosmic spirituality prevails, Oceania being one of them.

Donald Dorr makes a similar claim, that primal religions are quite different from historical religions, such as Islam or Judaism, and are, in fact, “the source from which all historical religions spring and the place from which they draw sustenance” (Dorr 2000: 43). The implication from what Pieris and Dorr are saying is that people do not have to give away their traditional religion in becoming Christian, and in fact they cannot, since cosmic spirituality is part of the deep underlying religious dimension of the human spirit. If this is so, then dialogue between these two forms of religion is essential and could indeed be part of an inner dialogue within the individual.

Missionaries and the Enga²

Not all early missionaries were insensitive or ill prepared. For example, many of the early Baptist, Catholic and Lutheran missionaries to the Enga district and elsewhere made a point of learning the local language and of trying to include people’s myths and stories in their teaching (Gibbs 2003:70-73). Language learning and translating the Bible into the local language provide opportunities for dialogue at the level of beliefs, values and practices. The New Guinea Lutheran Mission hosted anthropological conferences (New Guinea Lutheran Mission 1968, Brennan 1970), and Paul Brennan, working with the Lutheran Church, established the Enga Cultural Centre and published a very informative book on Enga traditional religion (Brennan 1977).

In the early 1950s, on several occasions, Fr John Schwab SVD, accompanied young Engan men into the forest for week-long rites of initiation (Schwab 1995). For the most part, Engan initiation rites are no longer practiced. Why did Engan men so readily abandon them? Is it because the worldview that made meaning of such rites changed so radically with exposure to a different world? Why did most Enga people feel that they had to make a choice between Christianity and traditional beliefs and practices? The reasons need to be investigated. That people attempted to choose one and reject the other is a fact, and this has become exacerbated in the past decade with the increased influence of fundamentalist churches that show zero tolerance for anything associated with traditional rituals, religion and spirituality.

Faith and Culture Dialogue

A negative view of traditional culture is apparent, not only among members of conservative fundamentalist churches, but among many Catholics also. They seem to have absorbed a view of grace versus nature/culture, rather different from the Catholic principle that “grace builds on nature.” Concerned to counter such tendencies, an Engan teacher and myself, have developed a week-long program that has been tried ten times to date.³ The idea came after my own experience of living six months in the forest with a small isolated community. During those six months, there was almost no contact with outsiders and we spoke only the local language, and as a result I found myself changed because of an inner dialogue within myself. Near the end, it did not surprise me at all to see a bird dancing on a tree branch above the grave of my host’s brother, who had been killed by a falling tree. It seemed only natural that the spirit of the dead man might appear in the form of a bird. I came to see that, their genuine faith notwithstanding, these Engan Christians, interpreted death and other life and death realities, from the perspective of their traditional religion. As one man explained: how could it be otherwise — “It’s in the blood”.

The rationale behind the week-long program is to dialogue together in order to touch on these life and death realities, as Christians. I found it best to have groups of either mature men or mature women, or young unmarried men or young women. That way there is more chance of a shared worldview and experience. Groups have ranged from fifteen young men to a group as large as 150 mature women. I go with a small team of facilitators and we live together for a week. With the men, we are isolated in the forest. The women arrange for a special area to be set aside for their week of retreat.

On the first day of this exercise, we reflect on culture and life in general and the teaching of the Church on faith and culture. If electric power is available, we might show short sections of video footage from the opening masses of the Synods, such as the procession for the presentation of the gifts from the opening mass at the African Synod or the presentation of leis to the Pope and bishops and the Samoan dance accompanying the presentation of the gifts at the opening mass of the Synod for Oceania. At first I was unprepared for the strongly positive response of the viewers: "If they can sing and dance like that in St Peter's Basilica with the Pope, then those people who have been telling us it is wrong to do so in our own church have been lying to us!" The fact that I had been telling them it was OK seems to have little importance in contrast to perceiving that the Holy Father thinks it is all right since he allows it in "his" church!

The purpose of these sessions is not simply entertainment—though at times everyone was laughing until their sides ached—but rather to touch on life and death issues. Culture is the way we live. Life is not meant to be compartmentalised into sacred and profane or sacred and secular. It is an organic whole. When Enga people begin to reflect for an extended period of time on their lives and who they are they get in touch with the cosmic spirituality which some might have tried to deny, but which can never be abandoned or rejected. Then comes the question: what has Jesus got to do with all this? Enter local theology.

Weekly Program

The weekly program for men and women is set out in the following charts. The program for young men and women differs slightly, but not in the main thrust.

Women's Faith and Culture Workshop		
Day	Morning	Afternoon
1	Introduction: What is culture?	Catholic Church teaching on traditional culture and beliefs
2	Childhood	Domestic life (gardening, raising pigs etc.)
3	Courtship and Marriage	Menstruation. Bearing and raising children
4	Conflict, fighting, sickness, death	Celebrations
5	Spirituality	Identity
6	Celebrating our gifts as Enga Catholic women in the community	

Men's Faith and Culture Workshop		
Day	During the day	Evening
1	Introduction: What is culture?	Catholic church teaching on traditional culture and beliefs
2	Initiation	Learning traditional wisdom and values
3	Relationships (especially relationship with their wives)	The role of the Christian husband and parent
4	Conflict, fighting, sickness, death	Spirituality
5	Identity	Myths, stories, dreams
6	Celebrating our gifts as Enga Catholic men in the community	

Identity

Days two to four follow the program as set out above. Myself or a team member will outline the assigned topic illustrated with songs, spells, or other illustrations from traditional culture. Participants then go into small groups to share about examples from their own lives, and return to tell about these experiences, or preferably dramatise them before the entire group. Sometimes younger participants are amazed to hear from old people just what life was like before any contact with the modern Western world.

On the fifth day we deal with identity issues. We start by looking for specific characteristics of men or women of their area. What is special about them and their life and culture, which makes them different from the people in neighbouring provinces? This discussion takes place entirely in the local language, with the whole group together so that individuals can agree or not, and more importantly, can complement what others have to say. If there is a chalkboard or a large sheet of paper available, we will write a word or expression in the local language accompanied by a symbol for those (the majority) who cannot read.

People usually start off with obvious differences such as their language or the dialect of that language, or even the speed at which people speak. They note their style of dressing, for example the length of their skirts, or the shape of men's ceremonial wigs, or their distinctive ways of singing and dancing. They will mention string bags, for PNG women are adept at weaving such bags, with various creative styles. Often the designs point to a particular region or province. It is

said that you can see the *hanmak* (mark of their hand) in the designs. At some point, people will refer to the environment—the water, the ground, and distinguishing mountain formations.

Then they start to talk about ways of relating—how women will marry into enemy clans in order to act as a “bridge” for reconciliation. There are feelings, ways of expressing grief and joy; ways of forgiving. There are values such as strength and, especially for women, preparing a place for their children. The ideal woman is *enda ee matapuma, anda matapuma* (using the image of a belt to show how a good woman manages to hold house and garden together). The ideal man is *kame* (a protective fence).

Usually we end up with between twenty and thirty characteristics of an Engan man or woman. We go further into these and relate them to dreams and myths and tales. But the culmination comes when I ask them to divide into groups so as to develop ways to celebrate these characteristics as Christians the following day. The fact that it is usually a Mass is my challenge as theologian/priest. Their task is to bring together these characteristics of who they are as both Engan and Christian. I have found that invariably, the result is very creative and most meaningful. Sometimes we end in tears.

With the young people, the program differs somewhat. Two examples will suffice to show how even young people with Western education can get in touch with their inner cosmic spirituality. Fertility is an important theme for the girls. They can be carefree and often careless when it comes to traditional taboos around menstruation. When, however, on the fifth day, I was invited to attend and came to the gate I was told, “Father, wait, you can’t come yet.” I waited, peering through the gateway, and noticed three young women performing a ritual in which they bit off a piece of leaf and with a prayer spat to the East and West—where the sun rises and sets. Then they opened the gate and beckoned me to follow. I entered an eerie atmosphere in the shadow of a small clearing surrounded by trees, with women holding burning pandanus leaves and all of those preceding me leaping over a fire of dried leaves. Later they explained how the initial ritual was one traditionally used at the end of menstrual seclusion so that a woman would bring well-being to her husband. They had replaced the content of the traditional spell with a Christian prayer about well-being, while retaining the traditional form of the spell. The traditional spell served as a “landing pad” for the Christian prayer.

The second ritual with a fire of pandanus leaves comes from the *angapane yangenge* ceremony performed when a woman emerges

into the open with her new baby. Jumping over the fire is symbolic of drying blood, thus bringing about the woman's purification and her release from blood-related taboos. Again they included songs with Christian meanings. They performed the rituals out of their concern that I was the only male to enter the female compound, which, according to traditional beliefs about female essence, could have been harmful for me. I was fascinated, firstly because these ceremonies are seldom practiced in recent years, and secondly, because they, from their own initiative, had delved back into their storehouse of memory and brought these things to light but in dialogue with their Christian identity. Thirdly, people shared later how they felt that they had touched into something very sacred. I too shared that feeling.

Even though initiation rites are for the most part no longer practiced, the ideal remains, and given the chance, young men are happy to enter a program based on the initiation model. Once I was staying five days in the forest with a group of fifteen boys and young men. After purification ceremonies, on the third day they were presented with a sacred *lepe* leaf.⁴ After binding the leaf with ferns and placing it in a safe place, the boys came to me: "Father can you celebrate Mass for us?" "Why?" I replied. "I have not brought the items we need for celebrating Mass." Then they explained how the *lepe* leaf they had been given was the principal symbol of life in traditional Engan culture. Somehow they felt how it was sacred. Yet they were Christians, and the principal symbol of life for Christians is their communion with Christ in the Eucharist. Hence their desire for that also. They were experiencing the sacred in receiving the *lepe* plant, yet sensed that something was missing, which the Eucharist could supply. Impressed by their theology, I spent the rest of the day going to fetch a chalice and bread and wine and later that same afternoon, deep in the forest, we celebrated Eucharist together. I sensed that for many of the young men, it was their most meaningful experience of the Mass.

Sources for Local Theologies

By listening to popular religion, local theologies can be developed and the liberating power of the Gospel comes to its full flower (Schreiter 1985:143). In the Enga case, popular religion is closely associated with the cosmic primal religion inherited from their forebears. Though most Engan Christians have adopted new beliefs and have ceased to practice many traditional rituals, there remains an underlying spirituality, which has its roots in primal religion. This spirituality becomes more apparent when facing life and death realities,

for the focus of traditional religion in Enga, and indeed through much of PNG, is the struggle for life in the face of death.

Cosmic religions are not merely “natural” religions, unrelated to divine revelation. The Vatican II decree on the missions refers to the “secret presence” of God among peoples (AG 9). The Vatican II Constitution on the Church Today refers to grace “secretly at work” in the hearts of all people of good will (GS 22). If grace is the presence of God in us and salvation comes from the acceptance of God’s presence, then following from Vatican II, we must presume the possibility of God’s divine self-communication in the pre-Jewish stage of salvation history. However, this paper goes beyond thinking of pre-Jewish or pre-Christian “stages” of salvation history. Rather, I have argued that cosmic religions continue to provide an underlying religious dimension of the human spirit no matter whether people are Christian or follow another faith. If people can come to understand that these cosmic and historical forms of religion are not necessarily opposed, then a way is opened for dialogue, which can start with an inner dialogue within the individual. For Engan people, dreams, gender relations, resolving conflicts, relating correctly to land and the natural environment, birth, sickness, and death—to name a few—care culturally important, both for the individual and the clan as a whole. But their significance extends beyond the cultural realm when introduced into the faith-culture dialogue. At this level, cultural elements with cosmic significance provide themes for developing local theologies.

Unfortunately, various outside influences including exposure to the modern Western worldview, and the impact of fundamentalist mission teaching have contributed to a devaluation of traditional values and beliefs. However, cosmic spirituality is “in the blood”. It remains, even if denied or suppressed, and the road to dialogue entails facilitating a new appreciation of identity and self-worth so that people can revisit their cultural values and discover how God has spoken and continues to speak through the “good seed” found in people’s hearts and minds, rites and cultures, brought to completion in Christ (LG 17).

Wider Implications

What can we learn from the examples given above from one area in PNG? Firstly, dialogue with primal religion is not so concerned with sharing “about” experiences as a sharing “of” experiences. We could have spoken with people about their worldview and beliefs, but the process would not have reached the depth it did if we had not

been together in an experienced-based discernment of how to integrate Christian beliefs and traditional spirituality. The young men and women could have described for us what had happened during their time of seclusion, but that was not necessary since we shared in the experience of integrating sacred traditions and Christian prayer.

Secondly, if it is true that that the “landing pad” is in place before the helicopter arrives, then we also have to admit that some forms of Christian evangelism arrive like helicopter gun-ships, driving traditional values and spirituality underground through force and fear. Dialogue does not use such methods, but rather, begins with a sympathetic understanding of the salvific significance of core cultural values, often values associated with life and well-being.

Thirdly, a scientific and secular worldview can blind scholars to elements of traditional beliefs and values. Despite the effects of modernisation, we are dealing with a worldview which tends to place much credence on signs and wonders. Those wanting to be part of the dialogue of life and of action, require a capacity to share in the sense of mystery which is so much part of traditional spirituality.

Finally, those concerned to include Christ as part of the dialogue, might well ask what sort of “Christ” they are witnessing to: a Euro-ecclesial Christ? A neocolonial Christ? An otherworldly metacosmic Christ? Following the incarnational principle as found in Phil 2: 6-8, believers engaged in dialogue with primal religions should be open to discovering a face of Christ expressed in forms that are quite new to them—a Christ associated with the sexual, the earthly, and the mysterious. Such a discovery would indeed be a valuable contribution to a more inclusive understanding of local theology.

ENDNOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies*, no. 31, 2004.

2 Enga speakers, whose home is the Enga Province in the PNG Central Highlands, form the largest local language group in Papua New Guinea, with some 300,000 speakers. The first Christian missionaries entered the Eastern part of Enga in 1947, but did not arrive in parts of Western Enga until the 1960s. Several references to Enga people and their culture appear in the bibliographical listing at the end of this paper.

3 I wish to thank Ms Regina Tanda for her invaluable contribution to this project.

4 For the significance of the *lepe*, see P. Gibbs, “Lepe: An Exercise in Horticultural Theology.” *Catalyst* 18 (1988): 215-234.

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