

Theology in Context — Papua New Guinea

A contextual preamble

A presentation from Papua New Guinea at a theological colloquium of representatives drawn predominantly from South and East Asian countries might seem, at first sight, to be the contribution from a “fringe-dweller”, and might elicit a question as to how its contribution might be integrated into a discussion of presentations from Asian perspectives. Geographically, Papua New Guinea is a close neighbor of several South-East Asian countries, and many of the early waves of migration of peoples to Melanesia have been traced to South East Asian sources.¹ A long period of fairly consistent isolation following these migrations meant that the peoples of Melanesia were not exposed to the larger cultural developments — religious, socio-economic, political — that have been taking place in Asian countries over the past few thousand years. Instead, Pacific island cultures developed along their own lines.²

¹ Archaeological and other evidence seems to indicate that sporadic contacts with some South-East Asian countries continued at least in some parts of the island.

² It will hopefully become clear in this paper that in actual fact many rural or tribal socio-cultural contexts in various Asian countries, as well as elsewhere, bear general resemblances at several points to Pacific tribal cultures.

During Papua New Guinea's period of colonial history, links were established (or imposed) predominantly with "western" countries (Australia and various European countries) rather than with Asia. This was the case both politically and economically, as well as religiously with the influx of Christian missionaries. In politically independent Papua New Guinea, western political and economic links and influences continue to predominate, especially in its continuing Australian ties, with the U.S.A. and Japan having gained a considerable foothold in the economic sphere. At the same time, diplomatic overtures to and economic arrangements with neighboring Asian countries have been increasing, as well as socio-economic exploratory missions.

Most of the major Christian churches have continued to maintain their close links with Australasian, European and North American "sending" churches, though there is a more insistent call for "partnership" rather than a "mother/daughter" or "sender/receiver" relationship. In recent times, recognizing a similarity with regard to certain broad cultural themes and emerging needs, there have been moves on the part of some of the churches in Papua New Guinea to look to developments in the indigenization of church forms and theological expression in various African countries as sources of stimulus towards and models for creative innovation in their own cultural context.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments of the past few years, in both political and church circles at a national level, has been a growing consciousness of the need for solidarity among the multitude of small Pacific island countries of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, dotted in the broad expanse of ocean. This growth of Pacific identity and solidarity is characterized by a sense of differentiation from both the Asian and Australasian spheres. It is becoming manifest in, for example, support of other island peoples seeking national self-determination and in the effort to stimulate cooperative confrontation with dominant and dominating political and economic forces operating in the Pacific region.³

³ These issues were among the chief concerns at last year's Pacific Conference of Churches seminar, "Pacifique '77 — Ecumenical Planning for Development".

I would like to suggest that a contribution from Papua New Guinea to this theological colloquium could be mutually beneficial from two standpoints:

(i) On the one hand, the voices of Christian theologians from Melanesia can be added to those in other non-western contexts who seek to articulate and bring to formulation responses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ from within their particular cultural context, taking into account both the life-giving and death-dealing dimensions of that context. So that one can hope for a sharing both of the dynamism of "incarnation" and of the new ways of understanding and responding to the saving word of the gospel that are thereby opened up.

(ii) On the other hand, Papua New Guinea voices have begun to be added to the prophetic chorus of those who, in Asia and elsewhere, see (and struggle to account for) their Christian identity and commitment as authentic only insofar as it involves a stand with regard to their social, economic and political context with its possibilities for either promoting or stifling human life and dignity.

Traditional Papua New Guinean societies and cultures

The socio-cultural context of Papua New Guinea can be seen as characterized by a mutual interaction, impingement or integration of traditional Melanesian and modern life styles, with one or the other predominating in particular instances. While some of our people in the more inaccessible areas still live in almost complete isolation from the outside world, others have known only urban life, and still others have assumed the role of international diplomats. It seems important, therefore, to attempt to provide an initial broad, descriptive analysis of the traditional socio-cultural context, since it continues in many and various ways to be operative in the current situation.⁴

⁴ Since the traditional socio-cultural context of Papua New Guinea is usually subsumed ethnologically under the more inclusive category, "Melanesian", I shall be using this term in my descriptions. The use of "traditional" here is not intended to connote a static situation lacking in creative innovation, though a substantially slower rate of change is generally implied than that which has been escalated since the initial impact of European

Papua New Guinean peoples in directly pre-colonial times can be generally described as composed of numerous small-scale, relatively self-enclosed, tribal societies, whose livelihood depended upon subsistence agriculture, supplemented in varying degrees by the exploitation of forest and water resources, employing usually fairly rudimentary, if skillfully contrived, technological equipment. The availability of natural resources in some areas created a situation of what has been called "primitive affluence". Coastal groups tended to be smaller, ranging from about 50 to 33 members, with village residence patterns. In the highlands, larger clan groupings developed, with a more common small hamlet residence pattern. For a population of about 2½ million people, more than 700 distinct language groups have been identified. Major social relationships tended to form a segmented network both within and across extended family groups, kinship groups, language groups, residence groups, tribes, and clans.

In most societies an acquired rather than inherited pattern of leadership developed, characterized by the informal emergence and decline of so-called "big men". Their emergence depended on such personal qualities and skills as enterprise in community economic affairs, the ability to discern and articulate community feeling in situations demanding interpretation, and the capacity to maintain and enhance their followers' status and prestige in inter-group activities. Often the "big man" was required to be something of a ritual specialist as well.

An important aspect of socio-economic life in most traditional Melanesian societies was the small and large-scale exchange relationships or systems that became established over time, whether with neighbouring or distant groups (for example, coastal/highlands), involving both basic commodities and valuables. Besides fulfilling an important economic function in terms of goods and technology, these exchange systems provided a vital means of reinforcing, promoting and re-evaluating established social group-

colonizing forces. It would seem, too, that there has been in Melanesian societies a tendency to "traditionalize" accepted innovations by integrating them into existing conceptual forms or patterns.

ings and interactions, as well as leadership structures. In addition, they provided a locus, through the medium of the ritual activities usually associated with them, for the operation of spiritual or religious forces.⁵

A common theme in descriptions of traditional Melanesian cultures is the pervasiveness of the religious dimension. The Melanesian cosmological vision has been differentiated from the predominant western one by pointing to the former's lack of sharp distinctions between the spheres of the "sacred" and the "secular", the "spiritual" and the "material". Rather, the religious dimension tended to permeate, with variations in intensity and extensiveness, all other dimensions of human existential experience, whether natural or cultural, with religious and secular goals and activities closely interwoven.

Two key aspects common to Melanesian religious conceptualizations have been notions regarding the primordial activities of "culture heroes", semi-divine beings with creative and/or regulative functions, and the veneration of ancestral spirits. According to mythically sanctioned traditions, the former were regarded as having "put" or formed various significant elements of the cosmological, geographical, and ecological context, as well as having instigated existing social structures and institutions, customary behaviour with regard to elementary life processes and technology, together with (and most importantly) the ritual activities considered necessary for the continued promotion of all these aspects of life.

Ancestral spirits, having once lived within the existing socio-cultural order, were considered as on-going participants in communal life, exerting a powerful influence, whether in a positive way upon the general well-being and productivity of humans and of animal and plant resources, or negatively, through withdrawal of support or the infliction of punishment, when the living neglected or disrupted the traditionally established patterns of socio-cultural life.

⁵ J. Freyssinet, in *Le concept de sous-développement* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), notes that one characteristic of economies based on subsistence agriculture is that economic imperatives are often in a very secondary relationship to social and religious imperatives.

In some areas the neo-Melanesian word *lo* (literally: law) has become in common usage the term for expressing a paradigmatic way of self-understanding in traditional Melanesian communities.⁶ It connotes the existing order of things in the perceived natural and socio-cultural context, established by creative deities and sanctioned and upheld by ancestral spirits. Living according to and within the parameters of *lo* ensures the strength, fertility, prosperity and continuity of the community, the physical, psychological and social well-being of the group and its individual members, as well as the fertility or availability of natural resources and the benevolence of natural and cosmic forces. "All spheres of life are determined by this concept of *lo*. Accepting, preserving and fulfilling it generates salvation in the Melanesian life context."⁷

The concept of *lo*, then, as the projection of an ideal state of affairs, connotes a relationship of harmony or integration between humankind, nature, deities and spirits. Large-scale communal ritual activities involving communication with creative and regulative deities and/or ancestral spirits focus on high and low points of individual and social life experience (birth, initiation to adulthood, marriage, exchange, harvest, warfare, sickness, disaster, death), with small-scale individual ritual processes accompanying a variety of day-to-day or occasional activities and enterprises. Many (and perhaps most) of these rituals contain elements which can be seen as promoting or restoring the ideal of cosmic harmony. "Man can live and be happy if the gardens produce, crops grow, rain fall to fertilize the soil and so on. These tell man that his existence is secure, the spirits are favorable, and the ancestors are happy."⁸

The traditional Melanesian life context which I have attempted to present in very general terms represents one set of dynamics in the present situation of life-style interaction in the case of any particular community, whether rural or urban. Thus, for example,

⁶ See Th. Ahrens, "Christian Syncretism," *Catalyst* 4, 1 (1974), pp. 3-40; G. Fugmann, "Salvation expressed in a Melanesian Context," *Point* 1 (1977), pp. 122-133.

⁷ G. Fugmann, *ibid.*, p. 124.

⁸ E. Tuza, "A Melanesian Cosmological Process," paper given at "Religion in Melanesia" workshop, Goroka, May 1978, p. 4.

in many rural communities, people enjoy transistor radios and patronize trade stores operating according to a cash economy and supplying imported consumer goods, while at the same time they live with a strong sense of interaction with spirits, whether benevolent or malevolent. Or, they make use of the opportunity for medical treatment in hospitals or aidposts, relying at the same time on the services of a village "doctor" who can divine the social roots of the sickness, and/or of a ritual specialist who can mediate with the spirits in order to re-establish the situation of *lo*.

In urban communities, it is not uncommon to find even tertiary students or skilled labourers debilitated by the fear of sorcery. For a large proportion of the urban work-force, especially those involved in semi-skilled or unskilled labour, their involvement in the commercial wage-earning economy of the towns is interpreted and expressed according to the dynamics and values of subsistence economy. So that money and commercially acquired valuables are not so much destined for individual ownership and accumulation for future security as for sharing and circulation in order to maintain and strengthen relationships with kin and language groups and friends, whether near at hand or back home in the village.

In some cases a satisfying integration of this "mix" of cultures has occurred, but it has also given rise to various forms of social confusion and conflict over goals and values, to disorientation and disintegration, which increasingly demand attention. I shall attempt now to present what seem to be some of the principal characteristics of the present socio-cultural and political milieu in Papua New Guinea, with the assumption that the traditional context must still be seriously taken into account.

The current situation

After just one hundred years under a colonial administration, Papua New Guinea became an independent state in September 1975, with a parliamentary system of government, guided by a Constitution that must surely be regarded as a very significant human contribution to recent political history. The preamble begins by stating:

We, the people of Papua New Guinea —

- * united in one nation
- * pay homage to the memory of our ancestors — the source of our strength and origin of our combined heritage
- * acknowledge the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of our people — which have come down to us from generation to generation
- * pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now.

It goes on to assert

- * that all power belongs to the people — acting through their duly elected representatives
- * that respect for the dignity of the individual and community interdependence are basic principles of our society
- * that we guard with our lives our national identity, integrity and self-respect
- * that we reject violence and seek consensus as a means of solving our common problems
- * that our national wealth, won by honest, hard work be equitably shared by all.

The stated National Goals and Directive Principles of the Constitution can be summed up as follows:

- integral human development of every person and the whole person in relationship with others;
- the equal opportunity of all citizens to participate in and benefit from the development of the country in all spheres of life;
- political and economic independence, with an economy based on self-reliance;
- the conservation and use of natural resources and environment for the collective benefit of all, and their replenishment for the benefit of future generations;

- the achievement of development primarily through the use of Papua New Guinean forms of social, political and economic organization.

These admirable ideals for national life and growth, needless to say, have not proved easy to implement in practice. While one may speak, as I have earlier, of broad thematic similarities across Melanesian cultures, the way in which these have characteristically developed and been expressed in any given culture-specific context has been by no means homogeneous as the diversity of language development itself bears witness to. In view of this, one of the challenges to the national leadership has been and continues to be how to encourage and capitalize on the richness of cultural diversity for the national good, while at the same time promoting a kind of "national cultural" Melanesian identity. Again, the safeguarding of small-group interests has led to long-standing traditions of inter-group rivalry and antagonism. The challenge is one of redirecting some of the energies involved in individual commitment to primary group identity, solidarity and prestige towards national interests and needs. This will only be possible to the extent that leadership at the national level can be perceived as more than a faceless, westernized bureaucracy of absentee representatives, in the face of which people at the local level experience neglect or submersion of their needs and aspirations.

Recent moves towards decentralization through the establishment of Provincial Government represents an attempt to facilitate and enhance the kind of "people's" participation held up as an ideal in the Constitution, but it carries with it the attendant dangers of fragmentating regionalism. The still more recent proposal on the part of the Prime Minister, Mr. Michael Somare, for the implementation of a Leadership Code for national politicians indicates the recognition of a need to curb the corruption that inevitably seems to accompany the over-bureaucratization of institutional structures, and to circumscribe the economic and other financial activities of elected representatives so that their energies might be more completely dedicated to public service.

The Constitutional ideals of "integral human development" for all, equality of participation in the nation's resources and their development, and development according to the wisdom of

traditional organizational forms, have been perhaps still more difficult to implement. During its colonial period, Papua New Guinea was exposed to and increasingly immeshed in a web of foreign socio-economic forces and structures many of which had global dimensions. These forces and structures have, to a large extent, continued to dominate the present socio-economic situation. In independent Papua New Guinea there is still a heavy dependence upon expatriate advisors and planners, especially in the field of economics, so that development programmes still tend to be influenced (if somewhat unconsciously) by foreign socio-economic ideologies which are in fact at variance with stated national goals and directives.⁹ In such a situation

most Papua New Guineans are caught between competing economic styles; on the one hand a 'traditional' style in which individual aspirations are generally subordinate to the communal requirements of the group, and on the other an 'introduced' economic style in which individual exploitation of a community's resources is regarded as commendable.¹⁰

But it is not merely a question of two competing economic styles existing side by side. Rather, as in other similar dualistic situa-

⁹ An example of this is given by R. F. McKillop in "Problems of Access: Agricultural Extension in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea," Discussion Paper, U.P.N.G., 1976, where he evaluates a programme for promoting indigenous agricultural development through the introduction of coffee and cattle projects in the Eastern Highlands. The projects were motivated initially by a policy of improving nutrition and standard of living in rural communities, according to communal co-operative patterns. The rapid increase in demand for extension service was responded to by an intensified bureaucratization of both technical and financial services, with consequent proneness to patronage, corruption and political maneuvering. In addition, the influence of (predominantly Australian) expatriate advisors biased by an evaluation of agricultural methods in terms of a foreign model of economic development led to the promotion of a small class of individual, purposeful, elite farmers and to preference being given to areas favourable to these methods. Summing up the state of affairs as it had developed up to the early 1970's, McKillop sees it as "a situation in which a tribal egalitarian society has been transformed from a stage of newly established contact with the outside world to one approaching the classic model of underdevelopment. A rural elite had emerged, many of whom have a gross income of \$10,000 per annum in a society whose per capita income is in the vicinity of \$10, and there were indications that this elite would soon emerge as a landlord class" (p. 15).

¹⁰ B. Turner, "A Nation of Beggars?" *Catalyst* 6, 2 (1976), p. 93.

tions, the modern capitalist style system inherited from colonial times has tended to undermine the cohesiveness and freedom of operation of the traditional system, causing various forms of socio-cultural disintegration.¹¹ While Papua New Guinea's population is still classified as 85% rural, the flow of economic activity is increasingly directed towards and around the urban centers and the modern sector. As a recent report points out:

urban growth is itself not a major problem in a country that has resources to provide amenities; does not denude the rural areas of resources, both financial and manpower: and does not lead to widespread unemployment. But this is not the case in Papua New Guinea.¹²

Some of the factors this report lists as significant in the growth of urban unemployment are:

- the rapid restocking of the urban labour force with school-leavers at various levels who expect wage employment;
- mismatching between the expectations of school-leavers and job opportunities;
- the rapid expansion of formal education accompanied by an inadequate growth of job opportunities;
- the existing highly unequal wage earning structure (taken over from the colonial tradition and not reflecting real market forces) which places a high premium on urban jobs;
- the association of white-collar urban jobs with the power, prestige and privilege of the former colonial rulers, with the conventional school being seen as the avenue to these elitist benefits;

¹¹ J. Freyssinet lists some of these forms: indigenous political structures lose their power; customary law is no longer respected; traditional disciplines collapse; the relationships maintained through exchange circuits break down, since surpluses are sent to the modern sector for commercial use; the diffusion of manufactured goods procured from money exchanges ruins traditional artisanship. *Op. cit.*, pp. 258-260. Another concomitant factor that is increasingly becoming a cause for concern is the malnutrition induced by the kind and quality of manufactured (mostly imported) foodstuffs available at tradestores in both urban and rural areas.

¹² "Education without Employment in Papua New Guinea," Discussion Paper No. 6, Manpower Planning Unit of the Central Planning Office, p. 3. For a discussion of factors inducing urban migration see p. 25 of this Paper. Also W. Seifert, "The Man in the Street," *Catalyst* 6, 2 (1976).

— technological changes inherited from advanced industrial countries (capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive) concerned primarily with productivity increases.

The impact of these factors tends to be heightened by the fact that, as yet, there seems to be no substantial commitment on the part of national planning resources to the encouragement of agricultural and non-agricultural (small-scale artisan, technical/service, etc.) self-employment.

Since Papua New Guinea still has an almost totally export oriented economy, the viability of the modern sector itself is highly dependent upon the revenue and resources obtained through economic relationships with industrialized countries, including the exploitation of natural agricultural, maritime and mineral resources by foreign based and multinational companies. The socio-cultural impact of the activities of some of these companies has become a highly controversial matter.¹³ But it can be said in general that the persistence of a dual economic structure, with one style dominant and the other dominated, has tended towards the emergence and support of both an educated urban and a small rural elite, with the majority of the people, both in urban and rural areas, becoming increasingly marginalized and dislocated. As one far-sighted politician has put it, "we are becoming increasingly aware that an obsession with economic development can lead to various harmful consequences; the pollution of the environment, the disruption of (desirable) traditional systems and values, the alienation of man and the exploitation of the poor by the rich."¹⁴

The challenge to Papua New Guinea's leadership thus becomes one of transforming both sectors in order to create an integral, people-centred national economy. Put in more concrete terms, a basic decision needs to be made (and its implementation planned) as to whether development is to be regarded chiefly in terms of growth in national GNP, or, in accordance with the ideology promulgated by the Constitution, in terms of 'integral human deve-

¹³ See, for example, E. Makis, "Bougainville Copper and Local Business on Bougainville," Discussion Paper No. 17, Economics Department, U.P.N.G., 1975

¹⁴ J. Momis, in extract from *Pacific Perspectives*.

lopment' for all the people, with the necessary emphasis that this would require on egalitarianism and rural development.¹⁵

The presence and involvement of the Christian churches

The fact that over 80% of Papua New Guineans acknowledge membership of a Christian church, and that the national Constitution sees 'Christian principles' as one source of its directives, gives some indication of the extent of the impact of the churches in Papua New Guinea. Since this impact has constituted a significant aspect of the socio-cultural context for almost one hundred years, I would like to highlight briefly some of the dynamics that have characterized the activity and growth of the churches within that context. This, I think, will help to clarify some of the challenges and questions posed by the current situation to the churches' theological institutions.

As in many other countries colonized by the West, here also the colonizing process was accompanied by the influx of Christian missionaries. Though the people came to distinguish between two foreign institutionalized forces, 'mission' and 'government', they were identified together as elements of colonial intrusion and the culture contact involved was experienced with mixed feelings. (From this perspective, it was to be expected that the emergence of a spirit of national autonomy and identity would see the churches, as well as the government and the economic sphere, as a target.) In some instances of what outsiders have referred to as 'cargo cult' movements or, more generally, 'cargo thinking', Christianity was regarded as the ideological basis of the abundance of goods and technology perceived as available to Europeans and the prestige and power associated with them. This interpretation was in accordance with traditional understandings of the integral relationship between religious beliefs and practices and socio-economic well-being.

In general, the underlying theological presumption of early Christian missionary activity in Papua New Guinea was that of leading the people from the 'darkness' of their "pagan" past and present into the "light" of Christianity and the possibility of sal-

¹⁵ Ibid.

vation. Some churches emphasized adherence to a definite set of beliefs, behavioural norms and ritual practices which implied the demand for a complete and definitive rejection of traditional socio-cultural forms considered incompatible with the Christian gospel. Methods of evangelization often included the planned elimination of these forms,¹⁶ though there were instances in which missionaries merely ignored or tolerated beliefs and practices that seemed inconsonant with adherence to Christianity in the hope that they would eventually die out; and yet other individual instances of attempts to study aspects of the traditional culture in order that the proclamation of the gospel might be somewhat adapted to the situation of those to whom it was addressed. Another aspect of missionary Christianity was the denominational divisions and enmities that had come to characterize the European situation. So that, in the majority of cases, the churches negotiated for geographical zones of operation, often on a completely arbitrary basis.

With regard to the present situation, in terms of motivation for life activities and goals, the most common belief and value 'system' in Papua New Guinea has been described as a trichotomous one, drawing on traditional, introduced Christian and introduced secular sources:

Traditional ritual is still directly activated, but mainly in times of crisis and therefore irregularly. Syncretism is inevitably present as expectations of the ancestral realm and Christian heaven overlap and are confused. Socio-economic welfare is strongly sought through secular activities with traditional ritual partly influential.¹⁷

For some people, a workable existential syncretism of traditional and Christian beliefs and practices has occurred, while for

¹⁶ As a national churchman has recently put it: "For years the traditional religions of the people were despised as the expression of uncultured and inferior pagans.... Most of our cultures were condemned as evil. People when they felt this type of threat went underground with most of their religious activities. One of the hot topics which heated up debate among students last year was: 'Christianity destroyed our cultures'. As a Tolai, I strongly believe that our culture has not been destroyed, but rather condemned as the works of Satan. I am referring here mainly to traditional religion" Albert To Borua, "Religious Setting in Papua New Guinea," Melanesian Institute Orientation Course, June 1976.

¹⁷ B. Turner, "Confronting the Gods," *Catalyst* 6,4 (1976), p. 237.

others unfulfilled expectations of the perceived advantages to Christianity and/or the experience of the foreignness of its forms have led to its more or less explicit and definite rejection. For some Papua New Guinean Christians, especially those who have adopted an urban life pattern, a western style compartmentalizing and/or marginalizing of religious beliefs and activities has already occurred, with the church seen as responsible for afterlife and otherworldly affairs. And yet others struggle consciously to re-appropriate and integrate a sense of Melanesian cultural identity with their identity as Christians in a changing context.

Church commitment in the fields of formal education and health services long preceded that of the colonial administration. The churches still administer a large proportion of the nation's educational, health and social services. Many of the most prominent national and provincial leaders owe their education to church institutions. The motivation for such commitment usually included a combination of evangelistic concerns and the desire to communicate the "benefits" of a "superior" cultural way of life. Coming as they did from the same socio-cultural backgrounds as the agents of the colonizing governments, missionaries were basically sympathetic to their developmental goals and values — of indifferent to them insofar as the situation created by the government did not constitute an obstacle to the missionaries' religious activities. The churches' own involvement in economic and technical activities for the establishment and continuation of its institutions tended to follow the general colonial pattern. Through those activities, in which religious interpretation played a very minor role, western missionaries themselves became agents of secularization.¹⁸

The general (if usually implicit) attitude of official church leadership to developments in the political sphere has tended to be one of tacit support, except in cases where the churches have seen their own particular interests threatened or felt the need to ensure the safeguarding of principles of personal Christian morality. In the present situation, this has meant a tacit acceptance of the ruling elite's ideology. New challenges and questions have emerged in recent years. On the one hand, a few ordained Christian mi-

¹⁸ H. Janssen, "The Role of Religion in Changing Melanesia," Melanesian Institute Orientation Course Notes, 1974, pp. 8-9.

nisters have committed themselves to fulltime involvement in key political roles, with mixed reactions on the part of official church people. On the other hand, individual Christians and representative Christian groups have become aware of the need to voice a prophetic challenge in the face of political structures and forces which create situations of domination, oppression and dehumanization.. The hope has been expressed that

the Church motivated by the liberating Spirit of Christ will itself become the challenging, liberating and enabling Body of Christ within interdependent Papua New Guinea, leading the way towards a just society in which the resources of this rich country are developed carefully and shared fairly within and beyond this land — in which power remains with the real people and within authentic structures rather than with the elitist controllers of irrelevant and destructive forms.¹⁹

The challenge has also been raised to church structural forms themselves. From the beginning of its missionary activity in Papua New Guinea, the Roman Catholic Church was slower than most others to involve local Christians in its evangelization work and pastoral responsibility. It is still largely dominated by expatriate leadership and administrative structures, right down to the local level. There has been a long established tradition of selecting members of local communities who seemed to possess the necessary leadership and other qualities to be trained as catechists. But these were usually regarded as "extensions" of the missionary priest rather than as commissioned to Christian leadership in their own right. On the other hand, the pattern of training for ordained ministers, based on the predominant approved western model, has tended to foster a socio-culturally alienated, elite group.²⁰

A recent survey conducted by the Catholic Church's Liturgical Catechetical Institute points out that lack of adult Christian

¹⁹ B. Turner, "A Nation of Beggars?", art. cit., p. 101.

²⁰ Apprehensiveness has been expressed by representatives of several of the major churches regarding programmes for ministry training which tend towards such an elitism, and which fail to relate ordained ministry to the general call to commitment and service of the whole Christian community. See "Theological Education in Melanesia Today," *Point 1* (1976).

participation in the faith formation of children is closely related to the fact that they are "not yet convinced that THEY are the Church". This is the case in spite of the fact that a general Self Study of the Catholic Church conducted from 1972-75 attempted to promote consultation and conscientization at the grass-roots level, and "despite great progress towards political and economic independence and self-reliance". According to the survey report, this situation was brought about by "the *structure* of the Church..., by its *hierarchical and paternalistic* outlook", so that "in years past the work continued irrespective of people's active participation".²¹ The survey finds encouraging the fact that

a few areas have started team apostolate. Such pastoral teams consisting of priests, religious, catechists, teachers and other lay leaders reach more people and gradually lead the christians to the experience of 'christian community' and to the realization of their responsibilities as the 'local church'. (p. 7)

The attempt of the Self Study to generate a self-understanding as "church" among the members of local Christian communities has been seen by some national lay leaders as a ploy to divert attention from real questions of the localization of church leadership and the creation of structures for real decision-making on the part of the people. One such leader comments that

many missionaries assume they are wanted. Some set up parishes and administer them as if they are not living on foreign land. The courage of Christ is being used to spread the good news, but very often it is done with the least possible awareness of the changing needs of our people. It is no wonder that some priests are amazed at the lack of initiative and spontaneity of the people. The Church, and in particular the Catholic Church, has arrived at a point where no foreign missionary should stay on in a community or parish unless the parish requests his stay.²²

²¹ *Christian Education in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands*, Liturgical Catechetical Institute, Goroka, 1977, p. 6.

²² B. Narokobi, "Towards a Melanesian Church," Asian Bureau Australia Newsletter 26, April 1976, pp. 8-9.

To summarize briefly, the challenges and questions facing theological institutions in Papua New Guinea can be grouped into two distinguishable but intimately interrelated areas:

(1) Those concerned with the development of a genuinely Melanesian expression of gospel faith and discipleship, including

- forms of proclamation, teaching, worship and service, and leadership styles and structures, necessary for the growth and animation of vital Christian communities;
- theological reflection and elaboration which will aid these communities and their individual members in construing their identity as Melanesians and Christians in a changed and changing socio-cultural context;
- attention to questions of syncretism, of the “domestication” of the gospel, of openness to the challenge of transformation that the gospel as a living reality inevitably poses to any culture-specific way of life.

(2) Those concerned with the churches’ relationship to and modes of operation within the wider socio-economic and political context, including

- the churches’ contribution to the realization of the goal of “integral human development” from a Melanesian perspective;
- commitment to processes of discerning the underlying assumptions and values of present developmental trends, as well as the dynamics of the disruptive and oppressive forces and structures that such trends have often tended to unleash;
- the need for theological reflection that will both articulate and provide impetus for Christian commitment to the tasks of development and liberation within the socio-economic and political context.

Theological teaching and research: present response

Certain key worldwide Christian theological developments (or reappropriations) in recent years, the emergence of which has been in no small part due to reflection upon western missionary praxis and the emergence of local churches in non-western cultural con-

texts, have provided a basis for facing the challenges of the contextualization of gospel, church and theology in Papua New Guinea, as elsewhere. Among these the following might be highlighted (noting that not all have been of equal theological importance for all the churches):

* The affirmation that the gratuitous, saving purpose of God, manifested and brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, is available to all peoples in all ages and places of history, and that the human response to this universally available offer of salvation takes place within the context of a human community, its environment, and its life patterns and institutions. So that one finds talk in Roman Catholic circles, for example, of "seeds of the world" that are to be found in humanly created, culture-specific life contexts. This is to be taken not only in the sense that the proclaimed and lived word of the gospel brings these "seeds" to full "fruition", but also in the sense that the continuity of the gospel itself as a lived and living reality demands constant reincarnation in particular historical/cultural human communities.

* The affirmation of a Christological "principle of incarnation", focusing upon the historical character of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the very nature of which subjected it to the limitations as well as the possibilities of a particular configuration of socio-political and cultural circumstances. So that while recognizing the inherent universalizing dynamic in the gospel message itself which constantly calls forth its proclamation in new circumstances and contexts across time and space and culture, it can also be affirmed that the gospel cannot exist apart from a cultural embodiment; that the history of Christianity can itself be seen as the tradition of human responses to the gospel proclamation of God's promises and God's action in each and every one of these circumstances and contexts; that no particular set of cultural patterns constitute a privileged form for the incarnation of the gospel message; and that only by a process of incarnation can the gospel become a "leaven" of transformation in human life in society.

* Following from this "principle of incarnation", there has been a reappropriation, especially in Roman Catholic circles, of a theology of "local church", which locates the primary reality of

the church in living christian communities that both embody and bear witness to the gospel in their local situations. At the same time, it opens the way for the development, at regional and national levels, of church forms, structures, leadership and ministries that will support and animate this living faith and witness within each major socio-cultural area.²³

* The development of a theology of the church as "sign" and "servant", as a people called and chosen not for its own sake but on behalf of all. So that the church is commissioned to live and to proclaim the saving, liberating rule of God not only in word and sacrament but also in deed, after the model of Christ, whereby good news is brought to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and freedom to the down-trodden (Lk. 4:18). The church's mission of commitment to the incarnation and extension of God's reign in the world thus involves a realization that the liberating, reconciling kingdom ministry of Christ is directed not only to sin but to its concrete historical consequences. And not only to these consequences in their personal and interpersonal dimensions, but also insofar as they permeate the socio-cultural, economic and political structures that affect human life. The church, then, is called to bring the prophetic, liberating presence of God's saving rule to bear in all spheres of life where it is not established — wherever human misery prevails, wherever new forces are on the move, wherever decisions are made and priorities set that affect the lives of people, wherever constricting oppressive and de-humanizing structures are in force. And, indeed, the church's ministries of teaching, preaching, worship and sacrament must be seen in dynamic interrelationship with the integral aspect of its mission by which it is called in a commitment of service to the world which God has so loved (Jn. 3:16).

To turn now to the Christian theological institutions in Papua New Guinea, these have been and still are mainly of two types,

²³ A few key statements from the Vatican II Decree *Ad Gentes* might be quoted in this regard: "From the start the Christian community should be so organized that it is able to provide for its own needs as far as possible" (#15). "Various types of ministry are necessary for the implanting and growth of the Christian community" (#15). "All over the world indigenous particular churches ought to grow from the seed of the word of God, churches which would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity" (#6).

those for the training of catechists or evangelists for small Christian communities and those for training ordained pastors. I shall look at each of these in turn and try to assess briefly their response to the challenges and questions arising from the present context which call for theological reflection, keeping in mind the theological developments outlined above.

In catechist and evangelist training centres the focus has been largely, as the titles indicate, on training for ministries of the Word, whether with a doctrinal emphasis, as in Roman Catholic institutions, or a scriptural emphasis (though from the point of view of a western theological tradition of interpretation), as in institutions of other churches. These ministries have included preaching, catechesis (especially for high points of Christian life such as baptism, confirmation and marriage), the gathering of local communities for reflection and prayer centred around the Word and the exercise of pastoral care for the sick and dying. In most cases, the degree of authority and leadership that such church workers exercised depended upon the extent to which they were regarded in general church circles as "extensions" of the ordained pastor, for whose periodic visits it was their duty to organize the community.

The problems that catechists and evangelists encountered in the exercise of their ministries in local Christian communities, together with the development of theological understanding on the part of teachers along the lines indicated above, have combined to initiate a teaching approach which attempts to deal more openly and sensitively with such perceived pastoral problems as the continuity of traditional beliefs, rituals and customs in Christian communities, the appropriation of Christian beliefs and rituals in terms of traditional understandings and expectations, and the apparent preoccupation of these communities with "wordly" affairs. At the same time, attempts have been made to devise ways of adapting catechesis and liturgical celebrations to the pastoral, socio-cultural context. This process of adaptation has stimulated and highlighted questions that demand deeper and broader theological reflection. (Some of these will be referred to specifically later.)

From Roman Catholic catechist training centres there has arisen a greater recognition of the need to initiate catechists into a deeper understanding and personal appropriation of the scriptures, stimulated at least partly by the perception of the familiarity with the scriptures that similar workers in other churches seem to have. As this develops, there is the hope that catechists will be more able to initiate the kind of reflective dialogue between the scriptures and the life experience of the community that, under the guidance of the Spirit, will both lead to a more genuine enculturation of the gospel and open the community more fully to its challenge in their life context.

The Liturgical Catechetical Commission (now Institute) of the Roman Catholic Church has served as a locus for stimulating, co-ordinating, evaluating and disseminating information about initiatives, both in catechist training centres and in parish situations, towards a more genuine localization of catechesis, liturgy and church structures. Through this co-ordination, more general pastoral priorities have emerged, such as the need for a diversification of official pastoral roles and leadership responsibilities, which takes account both of contextual factors²⁴ and Church tradition, so that lively, self-sustaining local Christian communities can emerge. This in turn has called for theological reflection upon the nature and role of ordained ministry, and its relationship both to other present and evolving forms of recognized Christian ministry and leadership and to the vocation of each and every Christian to share in the ministry of Christ.²⁵ (The fact that this set of issues has not taken on the same "crisis" character here in Papua New Guinea as it has elsewhere is due at least in part to the fact

²⁴ Among such contextual factors would be included Melanesian patterns of selecting and exercising leadership, community structures and decision-making processes, as well as the changing forms of these and of community needs. For an initial attempt to focus upon some of the issues involved in the formation of local Christian communities in a Melanesian context, together with a background of theological reflection, see "The Church as a Local Christian Community," *Point 1* (1972). A very brief presentation of how the understanding of what constitutes a basic Christian community interacts with a Melanesian understanding of community in a particular situation can be found in J. Knight, "Clan Communities and Christian Communities," *Verbum SVD* 18, 3 (1977), pp. 254-256.

²⁵ For a concise statement of some of the directions for a contemporary theology of ministry growing out of biblical study see James A. Bergquist, "The Crisis in Third World Theological Education," *Point 1* (1976), p. 10.

that there is still quite a substantial influx of expatriate priests to parish situations, although this itself can be seen as a retarding factor, as Narokobi's comment, quoted earlier, suggests.)

With regard to the second major type of theological institution in Papua New Guinea, those for the training of ordained ministers, the general pattern among the churches has been one of western-type, expensive, isolated institutions. Forms of training have overly emphasized academic standards and achievement (often at the expense of relevance for the real needs of a people-centred ministry) and there is still an overwhelming dependence upon overseas teachers.²⁶ The teaching of theology itself has been predominantly concerned with passing on, usually in an uncritical and positivistic way, the western tradition of the interpretation of scripture and the theological developments that have arisen out of western problems.²⁷ This pattern tends to fall in line with the predominant one that has developed in other Third World situations, and has been seen as growing "directly out of the 19th century missionary era" and "little modified by the emergent national autonomous churches, except that the highly-trained ordained elite have replaced the missionary as the kingpin of the structure."²⁸

Two characteristics of this pattern that are both inconsonant with biblical ideals of ministry and tend towards negative effects in the actual exercise of pastoral ministry are identified as follows:

(a) *The traditional pattern is often unwholesomely elitist*, stressing the status of ordination over service and fostering a false kind of professionalism with emphasis on position rather than function.

(b) *The traditional pattern is often lopsidedly authoritarian*, the ordained pastor being forced by the system (if not by inclination) to be the chief administrator of a large number of smaller congregations. When he

²⁶ Even in the West, of course, the effectiveness of the basic seminary model for the training of ordained pastors has been radically called into question.

²⁷ It has been pointed out that "while tradition is a principal source for Christian identity, it can also be used as an ideological tool for domination." R. Schreiter, "Constructing Local Theologies," Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, 1977, p. 12.

²⁸ J. Bergquist, art. cit., p. 11.

visits the outlying congregations he does so with the authority of the sacraments and the collection box, and supported by the mystique of ordination. Sometimes the less-trained local preachers are ordained (or "licensed" to preserve the distinctiveness of ordination) as a kind of reward for faithful service. The system tends to undercut rather decisively the ministry of the laity and to distort in practice the Church's understanding of the "ministry of the whole people of God".²⁹

Suggestions have been made for a restructuring of theological education in seminary institutions in Papua New Guinea that will open them to the creative challenges of the contextualization of gospel, church and theology. Some of these have been with regard to the establishment as a priority that both teachers and students be engaged in frequent, close, and continued involvement in the surrounding community, whether in specific church work or in service which responds to wider community needs. Reflection upon this experience and involvement, it has been suggested, will and should provide themes according to which the curriculum can be structured, while at the same time serving to sharpen theological insights and pastoral concern.³⁰ One concrete proposal in this regard has been a "disciple" approach to local community ministry training, with which a continuing and external studies programme could go hand in hand. Two factors that would commend such an approach are that it has a scriptural basis as well as precedent in Melanesian traditional societies in many areas.³¹

Other proposals have been along the lines of including as an integral part of the curriculum anthropological and sociological studies. But these should be treated in such a way that they do not remain mere segments of academic information but assist the students in elucidating their own Melanesian identity within the changing socio-cultural situation, in developing an awareness of the "structural" aspects of the religious, socio-economic and political forces that affect the lives of the communities they serve and

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Th. Ahrens, "The Work of the Minister as a Change Agent in Melanesia Today," *Point 1* (1976), p. 68.

³¹ G. O. Reitz, "Discipleship and Renewal. Alternative Approaches to Ministerial Training: Martin Luther Seminary," *Point 1* (1976), pp. 142-152.

will serve in the future, and suggest themes for further theological reflection.³²

It would seem that only by attending to implement such suggestions for the renovation of theological education for ministry can a creative tension be maintained between what may appear to be conflicting demands: "to maintain the advantage of a disciplined, historical and critical approach to theology which can be in itself a liberating and creative effort, and to 'relate theology to life'."³³ Certainly, a renovation of the traditional model is required if these institutions are to become centres or focusing points for the developing of a truly living theology authentic to the local context.

The search for new approaches to theological training in Melanesia has already led to some initial reflection upon the nature of the Christian theological enterprise itself, especially in terms of its community basis and the relationship of the trained theologian to the community. As one Papua New Guinean theologian has put it, "theology today is not just an impractical otherworldly subject for a few dreamy scholars."³⁴ It is not just the property of a theologian class or an occupation for the academy. Rather, its authenticity depends upon its being rooted in a Christian community's experience of faith in its efforts to interpret its hopes, aspirations, difficulties, fears and challenges in the light of the

³² For a description and evaluation of an attempt to implement several of these proposals in the setting up of a seminary programme, focusing both on an action/reflection model of education and on a curriculum content structured around life themes, see R. Williams, "Relevancy in Curriculum Planning. Alternative Approaches to Ministerial Training: Rarongo Theological College," *Point 1* (1976), pp. 153-159. Several pertinent points in this regard are made by the Vatican II Decree *Ad Gentes*. It speaks of the need for priestly training to "be accompanied with a desire to face up to the nation's own way of thinking and acting. Therefore, the minds of the students must be opened and refined so that they will better understand and appreciate the culture of their own people; in philosophy and theology they should examine the relationship between the traditions and religion of their homeland and Christianity. In the same way, priestly formation must take account of the pastoral needs of the region; the students must learn... the peculiar social, economic and cultural conditions of their own people.... All this demands that, as far as possible, studies for the priesthood should be undertaken in close contact with the way of life of their own people" (#16).

³³ J. Bergquist, art. cit., p. 12.

³⁴ A. To Borua, art. cit., p. 3. For a treatment of some of the more important issues related to this question see R. Schreiter, op. cit., pp. 20-22.

gospel of Jesus Christ. In the local community context it will be found that

people, while being Christians for a shorter or longer period of time, have already worked out their own understanding of Christian faith... A specific concept of life is expressed in their actual behaviour and in the set of basic values and assumptions guiding them. This concept of life implies a naive though not unreflected theology. It is formed as people relate to their environment, to other people and to their cultural tradition as much as to the future.³⁵

One task of the theologically trained pastor will be "to raise this uncritical theology to a level of critical awareness, reflection and decision." It will not be a matter of merely supplying and applying answers "prefabricated in the storehouse of western theology." Rather, "together with his congregation he will try to find out what the will and gift of God in a specific situation may be. Together they discover the critical and liberating power of Christ's call and promise."³⁶

It has been usually in connection with the appropriation of Christian belief and practice in local Christian communities that questions of syncretism have arisen, whether it is expressed as the reinterpretation of Christianity according to central categories of a traditional Melanesian world view and ethos or as the continuity of elements of traditional religion alongside Christian belief and practice. Efforts are still being made in local pastoral situations and in wider church circles to devise ways of identifying and eradicating beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour that seem incompatible with a "pure", orthodox understanding and expression of Christian faith.³⁷

With new theological insights, it has been possible to view syncretism from a positive angle, and to see it as an inevitable

³⁵ Th. Ahrens, "The Work of the Minister as a Change Agent," art. cit., pp. 71-72. One possible source for identifying a community's "working" theology, it has been suggested, is the locally translated or created set of hymns used in worship. See R. Pech, "An early indigenous theology expressed in worship," *Point* 1 (1977), pp. 87-121.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁷ A warning against syncretism was issued, for example, at the Melanesian Council of Churches National Seminar on Evangelism in 1976.

dynamic of culture-contact, and hence of the "principle of incarnation" as Christianity passes from one culture to another. In Papua New Guinea this can be described as an interaction of Melanesian culture, the proclamation of the gospel (itself embodied, in its scriptural witness, in a particular socio-cultural context or contexts), the western Christianity of the missionaries as agents of the proclamation, and the introduction or imposition of other elements of western culture which occurred contemporaneously with this proclamation. From a positive angle, then, it would seem that the process of syncretism can be seen as the ground from which a genuine indigenous theology can grow, and as important and even essential for the development of Melanesian forms and styles of other key aspects of Christian community life such as worship. The issues involved in practice would seem to centre around respect for the cultural context, openness to the challenge of the gospel, and a sense of continuity or connection with the Christian experience of other communities.³⁸

One ecumenically sponsored church institution which has attempted to actively address the challenges and questions facing the contextualization of gospel, church and theology in Papua New Guinea is the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service. This service is carried out by undertaking and providing a forum for the pooling and disseminating of research into these challenges and questions, at local, regional and national levels, through courses and publications. Among the general aims of the Institute can be listed:

- to study in a deep and broad way the Melanesian socio-cultural context, both in its traditional and changing forms, by means of anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines;
- to provide by this study ways of locating key contextual themes and issues for the development of a Melanesian understanding and expression of gospel, church and theology;
- to stimulate theological reflection upon these themes and issues, as well as pastoral initiatives which take them seriously into account;

³⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the question of syncretism see R. Schreiter, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-103.

- to promote also by this study the development among Papua New Guineans of a sense of Melanesian identity within a situation of rapid socio-cultural change, and of national cultural unity amid diversity;
- to undertake analysis of forces and movements in the socio-economic and political context, including development trends and models,
- in order to evaluate these directions and promote ways for the development of alternatives that better cater to the real needs of Papua New Guineans at local, regional and national levels for integral human life and growth;
- to raise the awareness of individual Christians of these forces and movements operating in their lives, in their communities and in the wider society, and to encourage theological reflection that will motivate and challenge them to action on behalf of integral human development and justice for all;
- in this same process, to evaluate past and present involvement of the churches in development work, whether through their own institutions, projects and pastoral work, or in their relationships as official bodies with the structures of power and decision-making — and to suggest directions for future involvement;
- in all of these endeavours, to promote as much as possible ecumenical cooperation, both as a witness to the basic message of the gospel and in order that the Christian churches might better carry out their mission of service to the Melanesian people.

Christianity and Melanesian culture

In its study of the socio-cultural context, particularly with a view to promoting the indigenization of Christianity in Melanesia, the Institute has been aware of the inadequacy of approaches which take as their starting point elements of western Christianity, such as theological concepts, rituals, sacraments or significant texts, and seek to accommodate or adapt them to, or translate them into Melanesian terms. Even when the culture has been taken as the starting point, the process of indigenization has

usually been seen as one of "christianizing" discrete elements of Melanesian thought and expression by supplying "functional substitutes", or of isolating parts of the cultural system in order to determine whether they provide suitable foundations on which to build a theological or ecclesial infrastructure according to a pre-conceived western design.

These approaches have not been entirely fruitless, especially in cases where Melanesians have been closely involved in the dialogical process and have been able to resonate with the outcomes as authentic to their sense of Melanesian and Christian identity. But there remains the recognized need to devise ways of analyzing and interpreting the cultural context in the kind of deep and broad fashion that will allow for the location of life themes which constitute a central part of traditional cultural identity and its continuity in the present. These themes can be seen as embodying people's key values, needs, interests and aspirations, the ways in which these are expressed symbolically interlocking systems of meaning, and the ways in which they support and give form and direction to people's concrete way of life.

Some attempts have been made to come to an understanding of key themes in Melanesian life experience as articulations to its basic values and meanings through intensive study of symbolic forms — particular myths, dominant symbols like "blood", "the pig", or traditional items of wealth, and ritual celebrations that represent high points of communal life, such as initiation, marriage and death ceremonies, exchanges, pig and harvest festivals and feasts, cargo rituals. It has been found that in these cultural forms a community's basic values and life meanings emerge along various lines of symbolic communication, in an intricate web that involves all the major dimensions of life experience — social life, political structures, economic activities, relationship with the natural environment, relationship with spiritual powers. The study of these Melanesian symbolic forms not just as museum pieces but in terms of their on-going significance in community life will hopefully bring to light elements of continuity and responses to the perception of changing needs that will provide both themes and forms for theological reflection in context.

One community situation that has already suggested certain responses while highlighting further challenges and questions has

been described by drawing together a series of key life themes and articulating them in terms of a traditional Melanesian understanding of "salvation" or, in other words, the protection, growth and fulfillment of life. Certain key notions embody this understanding of salvation. One is *kago* (literally: cargo) or wealth, connoting not only goods but also the general well-being, prestige and power associated with them and the secret knowledge and ritual necessary for access to them. Another is the notion of *lo*, referred to earlier, connoting the existing order of things in the natural and socio-cultural context, established by creative deities and sanctioned and upheld by ancestral spirits. Preserving and fulfilling *lo* ensures access to *kago*. The ancestors will remember and "bless" the living if they are remembered and honoured by the living. The state of *lo* is disturbed and must be renewed if these mutual obligations are not fulfilled. Certain types of sickness or misfortune are interpreted as the withdrawal of blessings or retaliation on the part of the ancestors and other powers.

It seems that, in view of the historical association mentioned earlier, of western Christianity and colonial economic and political power, conversion to Christianity in Melanesian communities "was often partly or dominantly conditioned by the hope to gain access to western *kago*, by the hope to gain equality with western people in terms of their life styles, knowledge and power."³⁹ This hope was reinforced by mythological tradition which envisaged the eventual reconciliation of two separated brothers, with the elder (black Papua New Guinean) receiving his rightful share of the *kago* which the younger (white European) had acquired during the period of separation.

Certain themes from this community context of "folk" or "popular" Christianity have stimulated theological reflection. The question arises, for example, as to how people's aspirations towards the sense of human well-being associated with food, health, strength, fertility and security are related to belief in the Christian God. It might be expressed in such question as: What can we hope for? What does the victory over sin and the definitive

³⁹ Th. Ahrens, "Local Church and Theology in Melanesia," paper given at "Religion in Melanesia" Workshop, Goroka, May 1978, p. 3. The points of theological reflection suggested in connection with this discussion of "salvation" are largely drawn from the same source.

establishment of God's rule in the resurrection of Christ Crucified signify for our human well-being? In concrete terms, it raises again the question of the churches' involvement in social, economic and political fields, of their willingness to stand with the socially marginalized or dislocated, the economically dispossessed or the politically voiceless brother or sister, so that genuine human needs and aspirations might be fulfilled.

Another theme from the same context that has stimulated theological reflection is the role of the ancestors in maintaining the state of *lo*. In many concrete cases the ancestors function alongside Christ and in competition with him as a source of salvation. In Roman Catholic circles, a general theological response has been to incorporate the "good" ancestors into the "communion of saints" and thus to identify their "power" with that of Christ. A deeper question is involved however, with regard to what might be termed Melanesian "spirituality" or "religious experience" as expressed in the veneration of ancestors. If this is characterized by a relationship of mutual obligation or reciprocity, with an attendant fear of retaliation for neglect on the part of the living, does it not need to be liberated by extending the experience of faithful obligation to include that of the forgiveness and reconciliation gratuitously offered to us in Christ, which works to transform not only our relationship with God but also the what we relate to our brothers and sisters?

Again, the experience of "conscience" or moral responsibility with respect to the preserving and fulfilling of *lo* operate only within clan or tribal social boundaries, though there have been possibilities within the existing systems of adopting outsiders into a relationship of "putative" kinship. This sense of moral responsibility has been translated into urban situations with both positive and negative repercussions. It can be said, then, that

from a Christian point of view the limited horizon of this concept of conscience needs to be widened. If responsibility is established only in terms, and within the horizon, of kinship, this is not only unchristian, it is also insufficient as people are led into new relationships and

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴¹ A more extensive treatment of these issues can be found in "The Church and Melanesian Marriages," *Point 2* (1976).

wider fields of action which stretch far beyond traditional kinship ties. As Christian communities are called to contribute to development of a new ethics in a modernizing society, interdependent with the rest of the world, also a new, much more universal focus binding and liberating man's conscience is needed, namely Jesus Christ as the Lord of the individual and also of the universe.

Another area of pastoral concern related closely to the challenge of indigenizing the gospel and the Church in Melanesia and calling for theological research has been that of Christian marriage. A central feature of the socio-cultural context is the stateless and fragmentary nature of Melanesian traditional societies. In reality, this means that it is ultimately the responsibility of each individual clan to maintain its survival and growth. The institution of marriage is fashioned according to the moral values provided by this purpose.

The pastoral effort of the churches has been directed primarily at ensuring that Melanesian Christian couples are married according to formal church law and procedures, with an almost complete disregard for or lack of advertence to the traditional values underlying marriage in Melanesian societies, resulting in a variety of more serious pastoral problems. Drawing upon new theological developments in the understanding of the relationship between Christianity and culture, and using research from other fields to support the claim that marriage as an institution is shaped by the culture in which it happens to exist, efforts have been made to provide guidelines for pastoral practice which both take into account existing cultural values and at the same time promote the ideal of Christian marriage.

*Christian socio-economic and political involvement:
theological responses*

A basis for a Christian approach to development in Melanesia has been found in the traditional notion and experience of an integrated cosmos, where happiness or fulfilment is expressed in terms of a relationship of harmony among human beings in their culturally structured way of life, nature and the spirits. This way of seeing the world has been described as "extensive" — "a habit of taking everything together" — in contrast to the western

"intensive" "habit of abstraction, isolation and manipulation."⁴² So that while westerners tend to separate both themselves and their religious experience from the realities of the environment, the Melanesian "has to take nature with him in his relationship to God."⁴³

Critical awareness of this Melanesian experience of the world has stimulated some important theological reflections upon, for example, Jesus' own experience of the world and what this signifies for the Christian. As one writer puts it,

the message of Jesus tells the story of searching the world to discover the face of God. The world of other men and the broad sweep of historical events were full of personal meaning for him. Physical sickness, natural events, the fertility of women and the fields, were all scrutinized to discern God's direct message to himself. I believe Christ felt very much that his personality was tied up with the whole world and that obedience to God was a ranging, extensive thing, not just a psychological matter.... Christians believe that what Christ offers is a personal integrity, and this changes the possibility of a vigorous encounter with the world. Christians must seek clues wherever they can be found as to the fullness of life that God gives... the Western Christian with his intensive view of the world needs to be told that the cosmos is not just a pile of inert dust waiting for his molding hand; but it is in fact a personalized, initiating and responsive arena for his activity.⁴⁴

It has also been suggested that this Melanesian experience can provide a basis for the proclamation of Christian eschatology in terms of cosmic fulfilment and reconciliation, following some key Pauline texts. In this way, Melanesian Christians can be helped "to appreciate more of their environment, land and animals and so participate in the area of 'rural development'."⁴⁵ At the same time, a challenge can be raised to those models of development which conceive of it mainly in terms of certain business enterprises, economic growth or technological equipment, and leave many by the wayside looking on in confusion and frustration.

⁴² P. F. Gesch, "Finding your place in God's world," *Point* 1977, p. 51.

⁴³ E. Tuza, art. cit., p. 5.

⁴⁴ P. F. Gesh, art. cit., pp. 58-59.

⁴⁵ E. Tuza, *ibid.*, p. 7.

Instead, a Melanesian Christian vision of development can be promoted which sees it as a total and integral process, one which places a high premium on the need and right of all to participate in its labours and fruits, one which, envisaged in human dimensions, opens up the possibility of the experience of communion with the creative, fulfilling and reconciling work of God in the world.

This positive Melanesian Christian vision of development has generated, in view of the current situation described earlier, a complementary vision of liberation from all the forms of oppression and enslavement — whether social, economic, political or religious — which impede this development. While the growth of awareness in the churches of this vision of liberation has been largely confined to a committed and prophetic minority wider representative gatherings in recent years, sponsored by such bodies as the Pacific Conference of Churches, have addressed such problems as urbanization, industrialization, inappropriate education, rural development, foreign models of development, and the impingement of unjust and oppressive international economic and financial systems and ventures on Pacific societies. Attempts have been made in such gatherings to identify the forces and structures of oppression and dehumanization operative in these facets of the present situation, to suggest ways of raising awareness of their operation at all levels, and to devise positive strategies for counteracting them while at the same time promoting a positive vision of development and its implementation.⁴⁶

An inevitable corollary of this involvement on the part of the churches has been the consideration of church involvement in the political sphere. Some Melanesian Christians have come to regard a hard and fast distinction between church and state as the imposition of colonial government and missionary churches, and as opposed to the Melanesian experience of the integration of life's various dimensions. They argue that if politics and the shaping of laws is concerned with the affairs of people and the molding of society, if the abuse of political power can lead to the dehumanization of persons and social groups, then the committed Chris-

⁴⁶ See, for example, reports from "The Tubiana Workshop: Cooperative Movements in the Pacific," 1976, and "Pacifique '77: Ecumenical Planning for Development".

tian has no alternative to political involvement. As one such committed Christian, John Momis, has put it,

Institutional change is a must and must be given first priority in this time of intense social change. We cannot talk about *individual* moral rearmament. Too many Christians unfortunately are like this. The personalistic misconception held by many leaders in control of churches limits our effectiveness. The impact of power structures and laws is so powerful that even a virtuous man is ineffectual against it. Therefore it is inconceivable that man — Christian man — can live without being politically involved. If we are not prepared to be involved in the political arena,... we will be involved in mere bandaid care which has no relevance because it leaves untouched the unjust and oppressive structures.⁴⁷

As an ordained Catholic priest holding a high political office, Momis sees his role in terms of "commitment to Christ's mission among men in the world", to the "task of creating a new earth for the new man":

As a priest, an ordained minister of God, sharing in the universal priesthood of Christ, it is both my responsibility and privilege to take a plunge unreservedly into the abyss of human affairs and in fact into human history in order to shape my own personal destiny in the context of our common destiny. Not to do so and on the contrary to take a position of non-involvement in the affairs of men, especially in the political arena under obvious pressing circumstances, would mean to me shirking my responsibility as a member of polis (which means: human community).... It is my belief that authentic preaching of the Gospel and offering the Sacrifice of Christ must be done in a concrete existential situation where the people of God — the real Church — are involved in their struggle for liberation and development.⁴⁸

The Melanesian Council of Churches has already begun to assume something of a "watchdog" role on behalf of the people with regard to government policies and practices. In a statement referring to a proposed new copper mining project at Ok Tedi, for example, the M.C.C. called on the government to evaluate

⁴⁷ In report from "The Tubiana Workshop," pp. 38-39.

⁴⁸ In report from "Pacifique '77," p. 55.

carefully all the implications of the proposed project for the welfare of Papua New Guineans, especially those in the immediate vicinity of the site, in view of the national ideals of integral human development, existing examples of wrong development and their human and social consequences, and the Constitutional directives regarding the shape and form of national development over against international pressures.

Further developments: problems and priorities

So far, I have attempted to give a broad overview of the socio-cultural and political milieu in Papua New Guinea, to suggest the challenges and questions which arise from this context for Christian theological institutions, and to give some indication of the kinds of responses that have been made in terms of teaching and research in theology. To conclude this paper, I shall now endeavour to present briefly some of the new theological and pastoral problems that seem to be developing and to suggest some priorities for meeting them. These emerging problems may be listed in a somewhat random fashion as follows:

- There have been calls from several quarters and in a variety of circumstances for the establishment of a non-denominational, national Papua New Guinean Christian Church, on the grounds that denominationalism is a hangover from colonial times and that only such a Church can be fully responsive to the need for the indigenization of Christianity in Melanesian culture and to wider national needs that challenge Christian discipleship.
- Recently, several overtures have been made by government bodies at provincial and national levels to co-opt the participation of the churches in planning and policy-making in various fields. But government bodies insist on negotiating only with co-ordinated church bodies, not with denominational groups.
- The effects of the dual economy in terms of social dislocation, disruption and marginalization are being increasingly experienced by a great majority of the people, both in rural and urban areas, raising new challenges to the churches' pastoral concern and efforts.

- There is a growing tendency in some areas for people to abandon adherence to the church and to either return to traditional religious beliefs and practices or to abandon religion altogether as irrelevant to their personal goals. On the other hand, strongly evangelistic and fragmentary charismatic groups are becoming increasingly popular and influential among a wide range of people.
- There is a growing dissatisfaction at local levels with centralized structures of decision-making, whether in government or church, in the face of which people experience themselves as objects rather as participating subjects.
- An increased awareness is developing of the need to question ideological presuppositions behind development movements and projects.

Certain priorities may be suggested for responding to these new problems and concerns:

- Encouragement of ecumenical understanding and co-operation on the part of all the churches, from the grassroots level upwards, so that the churches may be able to speak with a united voice and act with united energies in areas of common Christian concern for the integral well-being and growth of people.
- Reconsideration and redefinition by the churches of priorities for Christian ministry that will meet emerging pastoral needs, not only in terms of the "localization" of Christian communities but also in terms of ministering to needs in the wider community context, whether rural or urban.
- Serious research in theological institutions at all levels into the socio-economic and political forces and movements presently influencing the lives of Papua New Guinea together with efforts to discern pastoral approaches that take them into account.
- Programmes for theological education that will enable and encourage students to think theologically within a shifting cultural context.

- A critical method of approach to the teaching of theology that will allow the western tradition of theology itself to be seen as a history of “local theologies”, a series of Christian theological responses to the challenges and questions of contextualization.
- Direct attention to the dynamics of “popular” religion or “popular” Christianity, with particular reference to the Melanesian context.
- Evaluation of the appeal of sectarian evangelistic and charismatic groups for Melanesians, together with concerned efforts to encourage the development of Melanesian styles of Christian religious expression and worship.
- A shift from a negative focus on elements of “magic” and “superstition” in traditional religion to a more positive study and appreciation of Melanesian symbolic forms.

A thorough examination on the part of the churches of their involvements in the social field, especially in educational, health and social services, in an attempt to identify underlying ideological factors in programmes and projects and to redirect efforts in accordance with a Melanesian Christian vision of development.

- A commitment of the churches’ personnel and other resources to development for the rural majority, in dialogue with the felt needs and aspirations of people, and taking into account existing skills and resources.

WENDY FLANNERY, R.S.M.
Papua New Guinea